Dvar

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When my friend Linden Grazier, who suggested I explore the parallels between making teshuva and gender transition, I was delighted. Gender transition is usually talked about as a medical process of changing one's body, or a social process of changing one's identity. But when transsexuals try to explain why we change our bodies and accept the often devastating consequences to our relationships to our families, friends, employers and communities, we tend to talk in spiritual terms. We aren't "making lifestyle choices"; we change our bodies and lives to make them reflect our souls. For us, changing names and pronouns and clothing choices isn't about changing our appearances: it is about revealing, for the first time, our true selves, our best selves, the selves we were literally dying to become. In short, as Linden suggested, gender transition is an extreme version of teshuva, a process of changing our lives to reflect who we truly are and to grow into the people God created us to be.

For years, Yom Kippur was the best and worst day of the year for me: the best, because I could sob openly about a life that felt horribly wrong and wasted, and the worst, because I knew that no matter how hard I sobbed, I would continue to live that life. … For me, questions of good and evil were dwarfed by the mountain of bitterness, disappointment, and despair that grew every year I devoted to being a simulacrum of a man rather than a living, loving, human being.

… The realization that I couldn't keep living as someone I wasn't should have been the beginning of my "extreme teshuva," my determination to turn, no matter what the cost, toward the life, the true life, that I had never known. But though despair can be a crucial step toward teshuva, suicidal despair isn't: for years I not only despised of the life I was living, I despised of life. That despair didn't prompt me to make teshuva; it froze me into place.

Many of us think of teshuva in terms of sin, guilt, and punishment. Certainly, our High Holiday liturgy is rich in guilt-inspiring language. But the point of this language, and the difficult process of self-examination to which Elul is devoted, isn't guilt, or shame, or self-flagellation. I spent forty-plus Yom Kippurs feeling guilty and ashamed, enthusiastically pounding the body I hated without really making teshuva. …

Jewish tradition says nothing about gender transition, but it has a lot to say about becoming ourselves. So it isn't surprising that… I found the wisdom I needed not in the how-to guides to gender transition but in Rabbi Hillel's famous questions in Pirkei Avot: "If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when?"

…Transsexuals' lives may seem strange, even bizarre, but the questions we face in becoming ourselves are the questions life, and teshuva, pose to us all: How can we become ourselves? How can we put the selves we are becoming into meaningful, moral relationship to others? And when we finally become ourselves, who will we be?

The extremity of my need for teshuva – the utter falseness of my male self, and my blank-slate openness to discovering my true self – made it relatively easy for me to embrace Hillel's questions, and the
ceaseless process of becoming to which they lead us. … That's why we have the Days of Awe – so that we can begin every New Year feeling forgiven for the ways in which we were less than we could have been, and freshly committed to becoming more – truer to ourselves and others, not yesterday or today, but now.

… When we feel truly seen, we respond with tshuva: we know we must change our lives. The penitential prayers prompt us to feel seen by God, offering image after image of God remembering us, judging us, counting us like sheep, examining every our every deed and thought. But if tshuva only required us to feel seen by God, the Days of Awe would be devoted to private meditation conducted far from the distractions of friends, family, the sounds of allergies and infants, the irritations and enticements of community. Instead, we spend most of them together – because to realize that we must change our lives, we must feel seen by those around us, those with whom, through whom and for whom we become ourselves.

I have always felt seen by God. Like many transkids, I talked to God all the time. God was the only one who wasn't fooled by the boy and man I pretended to be. That sense of being seen and known by God literally kept me alive. But the sense that God saw me wasn't enough to stimulate tshuva, because I felt invisible to those around me. There was no place where I wasn't seen by God, and no place where I was seen by my fellow human beings. That sense of invisibility warped my moral and ethical development.

…Until I risked becoming myself, I couldn't stop, or even recognize, this slander, much less make teshuvah. I've now had five years to test my fears of rejection and persecution against the reality of individual responses to my transition. The results, predictably, have been mixed. I've been rejected by some of those I was closest to; I've been stared at and stared away from, I've been the butt of transphobic remarks in print and in person (once, for two hours, on a bus), and I carry a very real fear of physical assault with me wherever I go.

...The extreme tshuva of gender transition has enabled me to become enough of a person that I can now engage in the less-extreme forms that are the life-long obligation and the blessing of every human being. I now have real relationships, relationships based on my true self rather than a male persona, and that means facing tough questions about how my life affects those whose lives are bound up with mine.

…Of all the tears I shed when I was living as a man, tears that burned the most were those I shed over my inability to feel grateful for the life God had given me. … Feeling grateful for being alive, for the miracle and richness of life, no matter how hard it might seem – that is the tshuva that I do each and every day, because that is the ultimate goal of my transition.

... it has come as a profound shock to discover, at the time of my greatest vulnerability, that I am surrounded by love. As I have become known to those around me – people from whom I had always hidden – I have been met again and again with compassion, acceptance, tenderness, generosity of spirit that seems to have no limits. … Is it too late for me to learn to follow their examples? It is far too late to be asking such a question, but it is still too soon to answer. All I know is I am filled with love, too much love, love straining the cramped circumference within which I have always lived. Perhaps this problem is the ultimate blessing. What, I wonder, will I ever do with all this love?

Every day brings me closer to becoming the person who not only can but must answer. And so every day, when I take the medication that is making this possible, I say the blessing that registers the wonder and privilege of being, the awe and responsibility of becoming: Baruch atah Adoshem, Elokeinu melech ha-olam, shehechiyanu, v‘kiyemanu, v‘higeyanu, la-zman ha-zeh.
Lost and Found
You find yourself quite comfortable
in the bony clothes of death,
though you seem to have lost the feeling of,
well, feeling. Light moves through you
easily and eerily, as though life were a window
that was broken when you found it
so you can admire without shame
its fracture-stars
that never set, though you find you get a little lost
when you try to navigate by them
though the complicated waste
of loss and obligation
to the life that reveals itself
when you close your eyes,
the stars, that is, of the foundling self,
aroused and assertive, warmed by the hope
you found you’ve lost
in the bony clothes of death.

Essence and Flow
You live in the gap
between essence and flow,
neither being nor becoming
the essence that is everywhere,
making love or having sex
with every category of existence. Essence flows
over your head and between your legs
and leaves you high and dry, transformed
into something that can’t transform,
a borrowed outfit that doesn’t fit
your hunger to join the boys and girls
so lusciously compatible with existence
they can forget for years at a time
the nothingness that licks
the glamorous lips of essence. You hang around –
why? who knows? –
bearing witness to the willing world
from the unfashionable position you’ve fashioned, silent as a beach
through which the river
of essence you aren’t
flows into the sea.
**North and South**

Don’t underestimate your need
to cross the line. Frozen
on the wrong side of your desire
to remake the world
inverted in the mirror
of your otherness,
how can you be true
to the truth of being human,
something that bends
in a universe that doesn’t, a messy blend
of guts and spirit, responsibility and shame?
You are only an inch
from the constantly moving
source of life, no matter how passionately
you crush yourself
into the boxes – male or female, north or south, poor or rich, white
or some other social shade – you check
because you are scared
to cross the lines that keep you safe
from more complicated combinations
of love and loneliness,
rocking your soul to sleep
while you stuff your body
into too-tight boxes, knowing no one will mind
you don’t have the guts to live
as long as you stay
on your side of the line.

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**Joy Ladin**, David and Ruth Gottesman Professor of English at Stern College of Yeshiva University, is the author of *Soldering the Abyss: Emily Dickinson and Modern American Poetry* (VDM), five books of poetry, including *Coming to Life* (winner of a 2010 Forward Fives award) and *Transmigration* (a 2009 Lambda Literary Award finalist). A new collection, *The Definition of Joy*, is due out from Sheep Meadow in spring 2012; her autobiographical reflections on gender transition, *Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders*, will be published by University of Wisconsin Press around the same time. Her poetry, her criticism, and her essays on gender identity have been widely published.
Judaism and Gender:
Tradition, Change and the Sacred Art of Welcoming

Notes on a recent Kolot gathering and a conversation with Rabbi Ellen Lippmann

By Stuart Garber

Last month, just before Pesach, I joined with a group of other Kolot members to attend the last of a three-part series of classes called "A Created Being of Its Own": Gender and Sexual Diversity in Jewish Tradition. Taught by Rabbi Elliot Kukla and co-sponsored by JFREJ (Jews for Racial and Economic Justice), the series was billed "as part of a Kolot effort to gain awareness and create a community that responds well to transgender members and friends. The class (would) examine classical Jewish texts on gender diversity and explore their implications for creating a vibrant contemporary Judaism that includes the experiences of women, transgender, intersex and gender non-conforming Jews."

I was curious about the class but had not been planning to attend until a friend invited me and some other members of the Kolot Kesher group to attend.

I frankly expected a very sober and slightly uncomfortable evening of discussion about the challenges of some other group of people. Instead I found myself a full participant - along with about 20 fellow Kolotniks - in an engaging, provocative evening that began with an exercise that rocked my habitual way of orienting my identity.

Rabbi Kukla, who led the class, posed a series of statements representing traditional notions about gender and asked us to take places along a line in the room between two opposite walls, one representing full agreement, the other, disagreement:

I like to cook.
I like sports.
I like the color pink.
I have been told that I'm too emotional.
I have been ridiculed for being bad at sports.
I work in a job not traditionally associated with my gender.
I've been told not to cry.
I sometimes suppress what I think for not wanting to intimidate others with my intelligence.
There were more. It was a fascinating exercise to experience. With each statement the configuration of the room would change entirely, with some individuals moving from one wall to the opposite, others moving perhaps a few steps to the left or the right in the center of the room, and some staying exactly where they were. Sometimes people stood in places that would be traditionally associated with their genders, and with the next question they would make the opposite choice. This seemed to be true for each person in the room and it was fascinating both to experience my own internal process of wrestling with the questions, as well as to witness the expressions and movements of the others in the room.

Our fixed notions of gender identity were shaken loose. It was disorienting. I felt like I was floating. But, since I was in a room of folks I knew and trusted, I felt free.

But what if I wasn’t so lucky? Transgender people – broadly defined as “anyone who doesn’t identify with the gender they were assigned at birth” – frequently experience themselves as moving through life in this indeterminate space, constantly negotiating around the demands of the greater world that people fall into more easily definable either/or categories that may bear little relation to how they feel inside.

I got it.

We went on to look at cutting-edge language for describing people at various places of comfort or movement in relation to their gender identities. We did another exercise on our perceptions of how successful Kolot has been at welcoming transgender people and we reviewed ways that other institutions have addressed this. I don’t think we talked about sexuality at all. We also decided on several steps we could begin to take at Kolot. When Rabbi Kukla asked for a volunteer to write something for the congregation, I raised my hand.

Our early steps: Since the meeting, we’ve begun to put signs on our restrooms saying “All Genders” (covering the little pictures of men and women on them now) and have begun a process of changing our Mission Statement to include “gender identities” as part of the diversity that Kolot represents. Rabbi Kukla distributed materials that suggest other steps communities can take to create a more welcoming environment for transgendered people, which we have started to make available at our Shabbat morning literature table. You may also check out two websites Rabbi Kukla recommended, www.transtorah.org and www.jewishmosaic.org, which were both still under construction at this writing.

One of the most striking moments in the evening came when I saw Rabbi Lippmann standing far closer than the rest of us to the “disagree” wall when Rabbi Kukla asked us if we felt Kolot was doing a good job at welcoming everyone who comes through the door, trans or not. I wanted to find out what this issue meant for her. Here, in a slightly edited form, is our conversation.
A conversation with Rabbi Ellen Lippmann

Why is this issue so important to you?

For a couple of reasons. One is actually the reality of having had a number of transgender people be pretty active and regular at Kolot and then disappear - and then wondering how much of that is about ways that we're not so good on gender issues. I don't think that is the only reason they may have left, but I know that it's definitely partly that - and I am sad about it, sad that they aren't around any more.

The other thing for me is that I've always been someone who wanted to attend to the fringes. When I spoke at Lisa's school last month about my approach to community (The Academy for Jewish Religion, where Lisa B. Segal is a cantorial student), I said that when I take out my big, beautiful woven tallis with all its lovely colors and fabric, it's still the fringes that are the crucial part, and that's true for community, too.

And then somebody asked me, "who is on the fringe at Kolot?," because it was clear that we were saying that many different kinds of people were already here. And I said that, for me, transgender people are our crucial fringe. I'd like them not to have to feel they are so much on the fringe.

Every Jewish community has to think about its core, but it also has to think about its fringes, about those who are being discriminated against - and not just for being Jews. There are transgender Jews who are looking for community - and the more traditional communities are - by and large - not going to be home for them. So, where else are they going to go? If we're not adequately responding to them, in a way I think we have one fringe missing from our tallis. We're not complete in that way.

So it's personal and for me it is a religious obligation. As I gather the tallis fringes, which I do as I say the Shema, - traditionally done to represent gathering Jews from the four corners of the earth to bring them to Israel - I like to think of it as gathering Jews of all kinds together.

The way you speak of it here feels intrinsic to the idea of Kolot.

Yes. Kolot Chayeinu. Voices of our Lives. Who's the "our"? Who gets to be part of the "our"? And who says?

You, yourself, have known so many levels of fringe. A lesbian woman rabbi... with a non-Jewish partner!
Did you have an inherent sensitivity, a solidarity, for trans people because of your own experiences or did you too have to find yourself challenged?

I had to find myself challenged. I'd love to be able to say, "oh yeah...," but I've found it really challenging. I don't always deal well with ambiguity. But I am committed to the justice of this effort, and therefore to trying hard to learn and change.

It's refreshing for me - and I think important for Kolot to know, that your interest in this issue stems from your interpretation of what our heritage encourages us to do, that you're not just taking us on this radical path based on your own personal journey.

That's a good point. One of the reasons for the class on gender that we had this spring is that I get to sit in and learn.... I tend to think that people change their minds about those they think of as "other" through one-on-one relationships and that's always been true for me. So to got to know some of the people who were coming to Kolot, and then to meet Elliot (Rabbi Kukla) and to get to know a colleague who's in this place has been expansive - which for me was great coming into Pesach: coming from the narrow place (as Egypt is often seen) into the expanse of the desert. As the psalm we read on the Shabbat of Pesakh says, "Min ha-meitzar karati Yah, anani ba-merkhav Yah. From the narrow place I called God; God answered me from the Godly expanse."

I was really struck in the class I attended about how strongly you showed your dissatisfaction for how Kolot is doing on the issue of welcoming transgender people.

And not just transgender people. In any service, the way we've organized our space, I'm looking at the back of the room and I see the door. So, I see when people are greeted and brought in, and when they are not. And sometimes I find myself wanting to stop the service and say, "you, in the back! Stand up and say 'hello' to that person."

So, for you this welcoming of transgender people is very much related to the Kesher issues of welcome and connection we've been talking about this year.

For me it's a lot about that, actually. I had an experience on a Friday evening. I was standing in the front and the service hadn't started yet and a young black woman came through the door and was looking around. There were three or four Kolot people at the back of the room, schmoozing, getting ready to be shamuses. They didn't say a word to her. I figured that they either didn't see her, or assumed she...
was connected to the church, because she was black. So I went back to say hello and she turned out to be connected to someone at Kolot. So I said, "hello, it's so great to meet you, how wonderful that you're finally here, etc......." and thought it was what anyone standing there should have done. It's hard when you want to chat with friends to break away to do that greeting, but it is crucial; without it, we are a tallit without fringes.

So that is very much on my mind thinking about this. It's not just about transgender people in particular, but the whole question of how each of us greets people who look different from us, or who are different from who we think is coming to Kolot.

I have heard, for instance, that unfortunately Kolot doesn't seem to be very friendly to people who are very heavy. I've heard some stories from people who have been insulted in various ways, either by omission or commission - and I think for similar reasons: if your physical self makes people nervous, then how do they look at you when you come in the door?

My real hope is that that anyone who comes in through Kolot's door will be greeted exactly the same way: with friendliness and respect and kindness and a real welcome. That's it. It should be really simple. It happens. But it doesn't happen enough or uniformly.

This (transgender) issue for me is like the canary in the coal mine: it's the most grievous example that shows everything else. It may be that trans people are especially sensitive coming into a shul and that others at the shul are going to be the most nervous about them. How can we bridge that divide?

I've been reflecting since our gathering on what this all is like for me. I think the human mind wants to classify things in binary terms: yes/no safe/threatening, like/don't like, man/woman - especially when we're under stress. When something's a little confusing and we can't fit it into a comfortable niche, we can experience that as irritating. It can feel threatening. It takes a clear intention - a kesher kavannah - to, as you say, "bridge that divide."

I connect this to our very origins as a people. The Hebrew word for Hebrew is ivri, the root of which relates to our ancestors' act of passing through other people's lands. The Ivrim - the Hebrews - are people who pass through, who cut across boundaries. We are all "trans" in that way, and need to remember it.

It reminds me of Elliot's blessing: "Baruch ata Adonai....ha'ma-avir l'ovrim. Blessed are you... the Transforming One (who supports) those who transform."

It's a transformation within the self as opposed to the movement across. Who helps the passers-through, the crossers-over do that?
Did anything specific happen that led the folks who were coming here to stop coming or what it just...?

I think that some experienced other members as just not listening, especially with regard to how they wanted to be addressed, either in name or pronoun. Some may have been known at Kolot earlier with a different name, for instance, and even though they repeated the new name ten times, people were still not getting it. That is a kind of not seeing or being seen, as well as not being heard. That and just a kind of hands-off attitude, perhaps grounded in fear or confusion. And of course that can go both ways. Is the onus more on us? No doubt.

I have to say that I sometimes find some of what we’re talking about here, even though I know it’s so crucial, to be really challenging at times. For me the hardest part of the service is having to get up and say “hello” to people, especially if I don’t know them. I don’t know why. I can be very gregarious. But there’s a kind of effort involved. I work on my own all day. Some people who in their professional lives interact with a lot of people have internalized a repertoire and can just turn it on.

But it doesn’t matter what you say. It’s that you say it. That’s all. It matters that I look into your eyes and see your face and recognize you as another human being. That’s really what matters. And that’s true whether the color of your skin is different that mine, or your outward appearance is different than mine, or your outward appearance is different than it used to be.

That’s the Kesher moment.

I think it’s a way of understanding the Shema. Adonai is One. We’re all in this together.

May 2007
No Longer Strangers?

by Reuben Zellman, 2008
given at the Metropolitan Community Church, San Jose, California on January 27th, 2008

Good morning.

I want to thank Pastor Ellard and Reverend Anderson, and all of you for so warmly welcoming us to your community this morning, and for inviting me to share some words with you.

When I learned that this month’s transgender sermon series was entitled “No Longer Strangers”, I reflected that this was a remarkable coincidence. This week across the Jewish world we read the section of the Torah known as Mishpatim, from the book of Exodus. One of the best-known commandments in this section has to do with the stranger. This week the Torah tells us not once but twice: “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” (23:9). This is not the only place in Torah where we find this. In the five books of Moses we are instructed thirty-six times about this person called the stranger. God requires that we treat strangers well – we must be hospitable to newcomers and foreigners, and treat them with full justice and dignity.

And I asked myself: what might God’s words about the stranger have to teach us about transgender people in our faith communities today?

Almost exactly five years ago, I became the first openly transgender person to be admitted to rabbinical school, to study in seminary towards ordination as a rabbi. A few months later I was asked to deliver the drash, the sermon, at a Sabbath service at a predominantly gay and lesbian synagogue in another city. After the service, a man came up to me. Very kindly and politely, he welcomed me to their synagogue and then said: “Reuben, your sermon was very interesting. I appreciate your coming, and I learned a lot about the transgender community. But we’re a gay and lesbian synagogue. Why are you here?”

Since that time I have thought a lot about this man in relation to the commandments about how to treat the stranger. It seems to me that, at least at face value, this man did it by the book. He was welcoming and polite and genuinely glad that I had come. He was hospitable and certainly did not oppress me in any way.

But he could not understand why, as a transgender person, my story was relevant to him as a gay man. He felt that the transgender community was an entirely separate entity from his
gay and lesbian community; and he did not understand why I had been asked to come and speak with them. For him, I might as well have represented the competitive crossword puzzle community. It simply did not occur to him that the transgender community might have experiences that he himself shared, or that might be important to his own life story. And therefore he said to me: That was very interesting; but why are you here?

This would not be the last time I was asked this question. I think that this man’s response is a very common one. We who are fighting for real transgender inclusion in faith communities face this question all the time in one form or another. Transgender people today are still treated most of the time and in most communities as if we are strangers on this planet. When we transition or come out, we are often made into unwelcome strangers. When we simply live our lives as our true selves, we are often met with cruelty and abuse. I probably need not remind anyone here how dark it can be for trans people today. Rampant discrimination has led to high unemployment and poverty; lack of access to health care and education and other resources; deplorable levels of violence; rejection by friends and family. It is not surprising that many trans people have encountered deep despair. And it is no exaggeration to say that whether a transgender person finds a welcoming, loving faith home can be a matter of life or death.

Thankfully, some synagogues and churches have decided that it’s high time to be those welcoming sanctuaries for our community. And so faith communities like yours and like mine have been in processes of soul-searching and wrestling and changing, to figure out how to become more trans-friendly. Communities like these are saving lives every day. I pray that more and more will follow, and choose to open their doors wider and affirm that people of all genders are made equally in the image of God. It is urgent that we all heed that commandment to welcome those of us who have been called strangers.

But Jewish theology demands even more from us than this. Thirty-six times the Torah teaches us to treat the stranger with justice; even to love strangers as ourselves. But that is not enough. There is a very important distinction between the act of not oppressing someone and the act of truly including them. Torah teaches us that there is something deeply and uniquely important about those who are deemed strangers. The great contemporary Jewish thinker Elie Wiesel beautifully explains the stranger in Jewish understanding:

“Man, by definition, is born a stranger; coming from “nowhere” he is thrust into an alien world – one which existed before him and did not need him to survive. Yet a stranger goes through life meeting other strangers… and, estranged from both this world and himself, his very existence lies in doubt…on the sociological level…the stranger is someone who suggests the unknown…the stranger represents what you are not…the stranger is the
other…For the Jew, however, the stranger suggests a world to be lived in, to be enhanced, or saved. One awaits the stranger; one welcomes him…in our tradition, the stranger may well be someone very important: a prophet in disguise…or even the Messiah. Thus, with every stranger we hope to receive a fragment of his secret…to live without strangers would result in an impoverished existence…to live only amongst ourselves, never facing an outsider to question our certainties, to look beyond the boundaries, to look through him towards God…”

In other words, opening the door to the stranger is not enough. We must welcome them to impact us, to better us, to change us. When it comes to welcoming transgender people into our faith communities, we must say more than: come share this place with me. We must say: come share yourself with me. We must not only make more room at the table; we have to change what’s on the menu. Truly welcoming trans people into our houses of worship means we must all be prepared to think differently, to do differently, to believe differently. We must be ready to be changed, institutionally and personally, by the particular knowledge and gifts that transgender people bring.

And this is not easy. Because one of the gifts the trans community brings is a shattering of the most basic myths that all of us are taught from birth – myths about who human beings are and what we can be. For so long our society has been built upon this myth: that there are two and only two ways of being human, male and female; that these identities are determined by our bodies at birth, and cannot be changed. But we trans people know that this is not true. We know that there are more than two ways of being created in God’s image. We know that these false boundaries and boxes can be and must be moved, or redrawn, or broken down. There is a profound cultural revolution happening today. Trans people are coming out to tell our stories, and these stories often uproot long-held assumptions. Not only is it possible to change genders, it is possible to be bi-gendered, or multi-gendered, or to identify with no gender at all. The world that God has laid before us is much greater, more nuanced, and more wonderful than anything we can categorize or define.

When we try to limit God’s creative power into two little boxes, all human beings are harmed and limited. Anyone of any identity today – trans, gay, queer or straight – who does not conform to society’s gender expectations is vulnerable to abuse. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight people are also hurt by our society’s narrowness, and prevented from becoming and expressing their full and authentic selves. Butch lesbians who aren’t hired, effeminate straight men who can’t find housing, boys whose dolls are taken away, girls kept off the sports team – we are ALL suffering from a system that does not reflect the true diversity of human beings. Everyone has a stake in this fight for freedom of gender expression. It is each of our sacred responsibility to let our own Divine image shine, to reveal the unique soul that the Creator
has placed within us – whether that soul is gender-conforming or not.

To truly welcome and affirm transgender people in our faith communities is to acknowledge that all of our liberation is bound up together. We trans people ask our world to question its certainties, to look beyond its boundaries, and to look through us to see God and God’s work in a different way. To really welcome transgender people is to finally really welcome every person, and the full spectrum of their own gender experiences. This, I believe, is what it means to welcome the stranger – to have our communities transformed by their liberating presence. When the presence of the stranger creates more room for everyone to be their true selves, then we have offered true inclusion.

People are often surprised to learn that in Jewish tradition, transgender and gender-variant people have really never been strangers. It is widely believed that Jewish law and traditions prohibit living a transgender life. I am often asked to explain how it is possible to be an out trans person and a religious Jew at the same time.

But if we examine traditional Jewish thinking and writings, we discover that Judaism has known and included people of many sexes and genders for at least two thousand years. In fact, on matters of gender variation, Jewish legal and social thought from antiquity is far more nuanced and humane than many of our beliefs and practices today, in twenty-first century United States.

For example, the Babylonian Talmud, circa 600 C.E., describes several gender or sexual categories, not just two. There are women who have something other than the usual feminine traits; men having other than the usual masculine traits; people without identifiable sex or gender; and people with traits of multiple sexes or genders. By the third century, the Mishna teaches that it is not permitted to cause any harm to a gender-variant person; and that anyone who kills a gender-variant person is subject to the usual punishment. When a person is born who has traits of multiple sexes, their mother is to act as if she had borne both a son and a daughter, and is to present to God a doubled offering for her child. The Talmud addresses questions about intersex and transgender people in every aspect of society: marriage, property, dress and conduct, inheritance, conversion, sex, religious duties. The scholars try to figure out how many categories of people there really are and the proper legal treatment of each one. Two thousand years ago, our Jewish forbearers were asking questions that we are just beginning to ask today.

By contrast, for the greatest part, we today in the 21st century West have chosen to leave trans and intersex people out of society altogether. Our Jewish scholars of the past appear to have never considered that an option. In our tradition it is understood, first of all, that intersex and transgender people do exist. It is specified clearly that their lives are of equal value to
any others. And it is assumed that social institutions must figure out how to fit such people in. Whenever I teach people and we study these texts, I remind them that our ancient rabbis’ solutions are of course highly imperfect. But how I wish we today were closer to where they were almost 2,000 years ago. They were not advocating for gender liberation as I might wish that they had. But I do believe that in many ways, Jewish traditions of the past are way ahead of where Jewish communities are now, or where our country is now in general. Jewish tradition assumes an essential humanity in every person, and that supercedes everything else. We are all made by God and in God’s image – no matter what our body; no matter what our gender.

That question that the man asked me five years ago is the one question that Jewish tradition never asks of transgender people: Why are you here? Our scholars take it for granted that we are here; and we will continue to be here, in all communities, in all parts of the globe. I believe that the holy task of faith communities now is to rediscover and reassert these liberating truths that each of our traditions already know. And then we must add to that our developing wisdom. Across lines of gender and culture, race and religion, all of our communities must be allies in radical, inclusive welcome.

My favorite teaching is from Rabbi Yosi. In 200 C.E., he wrote: the gender-variant person cannot be categorized as a single gender; they are briah bifney atzmah, creations unto themselves.

I would add that we all are. Every person is an absolutely unique being, with our own genders and loves and knowledge and insight to be shared. In this sense we are all strangers, because none of us can really be boxed in, and no person is exactly like the next; none of us can ever fully know what it is like to be anyone else. At the same time, none of us are strangers, because we are all in this most profound uniqueness together, with our many genders and stories. And we welcome each other and celebrate each other, and look through each other towards the wonderous God who has done this, the God who surpasses all boundaries, the Holy One who welcomes all.

Let not the stranger say,
Who has attached themselves to the Almighty,
“Adonai will keep me apart from God’s people”;
And let not the eunuch say,
“I am a withered tree.”
For thus said Adonai:
“As for the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
Who have chosen what I desire
And hold fast to My covenant—
I will give them, in My House
And within my walls,
A monument and a name
Better than sons or daughters
I will give them an everlasting name
Which shall not perish.
As for the strangers
Who attach themselves to the Eternal One,
To minister to God,
And to love the name of Adonai,
To be God’s servants—
All who keep the sabbath and do not profane it,
And who hold fast to My covenant—
I will bring them to My sacred mount
And let them rejoice in My house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
Shall be welcome on My altar;
For My House shall be called
A house of prayer for all peoples.”
On LGBTQ Involvement in Synagogue Life
Bnai Keshet, Montclair, NJ
Friday, February 26, 2016 / 17 Adar I 5776
Rabbi Ellen Lippmann

The Eternal spoke to Moses, saying, “When you lift the head of the people of Israel…”

That is how this week’s Torah portion begins. The phrase “lift the head” is usually translated “take a census.” We more often say, “counting heads,” though that would be an extremely inefficient way to take a census here these days.

I am here because Rabbi Ariann Weitzman and Yael Silverberg-Urian asked me to talk, essentially, about taking a census – to think aloud with all of you about who is in and who is out at Bnai Keshet. [Thank you both, and to Rabbi Tepperman who took time to write to me even from sabbatical!]

Back to the text: One year in Torah study at my congregation, Kolot Chayeinu/Voices of Our Lives in Brooklyn, a member, an African American lesbian, commented on the phrase “lift the head.” We count heads like this, she said [show tapping heads]. But if you lift a head, you see a face. And if you lift a lot of heads, you see a lot of faces – each individual, each full of its own light, each a full-fledged human being.

I am here because we all have to lift heads.

This spring I am celebrating 25 years since my ordination as a rabbi, at HUC-JIR, the Reform seminary in New York. I’ll be getting an honorary degree, a nice thing that notes I and my classmates are still standing 25 years since May 1991. Mostly what I remember is being in the closet for 5 years of my rabbinic training, learning to close off my heart as I simultaneously learned how to share the depths of my heart as a developing rabbi. I had been out as a lesbian before I went to rabbinic school, so for me the seminary was where I learned to walk back into the closet.

Do you know what it feels like to be unseen?

When you lift someone’s head, you get to look into their eyes, windows to the heart and soul. Once you do, there is no un-lifting. You must lift with great care, knowing you enter a true encounter.

Do you know what it feels like to truly encounter someone?
I had a meeting with a new member of my congregation, someone interested in studying for conversion. I offered him tea in the slate blue cups we have at our office. During our talk I noticed that he had painted his nails the exact same color as those cups. I said, “Your nail polish matches the cup exactly! Wow.” He felt seen; I did not ignore the reality that he – he! – had painted his nails, which meant something important to him as he explores his gender realities. I do not know what it means. But I know it is important.

That same recognition is what must be present in all the work we do for justice: who is the human being at the other end of the action? What person will be paid a living wage? Who will honor their nanny with benefits and respect? How will Syrian refugees find new homes? And how will we create justice in our own homes, our own spiritual homes? As a member of our Kolot Race Task Force recently wrote, “The work that we do in our homes is just as important as the work that we are called to do in the world. And that is true of our spiritual homes as well.”

I want all of us here to keep lifting heads, to keep seeing, to be seen, to be human. Each of us was created b’tzelem Elohim, in God’s image. Every one of us! That knowledge is at the heart of the urge for justice. Its eradication is at the heart of all terror, the foundation of all genocide.

I am here because I want as a Jew to say never again and know that I mean never will anyone obliterate any entire population AND I want as a queer person to say never again and know I mean there are so many things that should never happen again

NEVER AGAIN

Never again a rabbinic student going through school in hiding.

Never again to be cast away by those who use the Bible to dismiss us.

Never again a college student jumping off a bridge to his death because his roommate mocked his sexual connection.

Never again a parent unable to be with a child because of misguided lawyers and enacted prejudice.

Never again a trans person attacked on the street for being transgender.

Never again LGBTQ deaths due to neglect and abandonment.

Never again state-approved killing of LGBTQ people anywhere in the world.
Never again a gay man beaten by Jews on the street

YES AGAIN

Yes to the wisdom, clarity, heart God places in human beings and yes to the times they are used for good.

Yes to marriage rights expanding across the country and across state lines, yes to love and yes to great sex

Yes to the “It Gets Better” videos and to all the ways people encourage those who are losing hope

Yes to LGBTQ centers across the country

Yes to gay churches and synagogues that paved the way and yes to the amazing efforts of gay Muslims that will create a gay mosque and yes to every religious group that opens rather than closing doors

Yes to activists and advocates of every generation who pushed hard and keep pushing

Yes to the memory of Stonewall and yes to resistance

Yes to all who open their doors even if it seems a little scary

And yes yes, yes to the glory of having the courage to come out as gay or lesbian, as queer, as trans, as gender variant, even in the face of this crazy world we live in.

And Now

You here at Bnai Keshet have done a lot of work to move your community. I am not talking to neophytes. So I just want to mention some things to think about, some ways you might consider moving forward. And then I want us to look at some texts together and maybe do some storytelling.

First, I want to introduce you to my unusual idea about welcoming. I think all synagogues, all communities should be welcoming to all: Every person who walks through the doors should be greeted, given whatever assistance is needed, and guided to the right place – a chair, the next room, the rest room. BUT I think a synagogue should never say, “We welcome you specific type of person,” as in “We welcome LGBTQ people.” Why? Because that kind of “welcome” immediately sets up a “we” and a “you.” Please do not say you at Bnai Keshet are welcoming to LGBTQ people. If you
do, I will know that “you” are NOT LGBTQ, that I am, and that you are telling me I am different from you.

Second, please do recognize when you need to learn to be able to be a place where many kinds of people can find a home. At Kolot Chayeinu a few years ago, we noted that many more transgender people were coming to services and asking to be seen. So we engaged Rabbi Elliott Kukla, a frequent Kolot visitor, and a now a transgender rabbi, to do a series of teachings for us. Those sessions opened our eyes and led us to do things like post “all genders” signs on our rest rooms, to add “all gender identities” to the list of “who we are” in Kolot’s mission statement, to have a transgender speaker on Rosh Hashanah when a lot of people would hear her, and more. Are we perfect? No way. I and too many of us stumble over pronouns, forget to ask what pronoun is right for the person we are looking at, forget what issues may be important, like what are the main health care issues or economic stumbling blocks for a lot of transgender people. But we are trying. And the very patient trans folks in our community recognize our attempts and know our eyes are opening. The same is true for a rabbi doing a first same-gender wedding, or baby-naming, or divorce!

Third, include LGBTQ people in larger issues. When I asked my partner what she thought I should speak about tonight, she said, “What about aging gays?” All of us face the need to address aging people in our communities. How do those issues hit LGBTQ people? The same as anyone else AND…What is involved in that AND? Health care, economic issues, family engagement or not, traditional Jews running cemeteries or funeral homes, and more.

Finally, I want to bring some learning from our work about race and racism and offer it here about LGBTQ folks: Be sure to have representation: Are there gay and lesbian folks on your board? Are trans folks evident in committee work or as teachers? Can people come into Bnai Keshet and know that some of the rainbow children here are LGBTQ? How do they know they have a place here?

All of this goes back to the question of being seen. Ultimately, we all have to ask ourselves if we can really say that the person – any person – standing in front of us was made in the image of God. We start by lifting their heads.
December 2004

The Wondering Jew
Judaism and Gender Identity

Leah Koenig

Dana International usually favors heavy makeup, plunging necklines, and heels. She lacks the physical prerequisites for laying t'fillin, studying kabbalah, and reading Torah in an Orthodox synagogue. Nevertheless, in 1998, a Jerusalem beit din – rabbinical court – ruled that the Israeli pop star could be counted in a traditional minyan, a privilege that’s normally reserved for males alone.

Why is that? Dana International is an MtF – male to female – transsexual, and as one of the rabbis in the beit din was quoted as saying, in Jewish law, “one who is born male remains so his entire life.” Even though Dana International identifies as a woman — even though she underwent surgery in 1993 to physically become one — religious Judaism still classifies her as male.

The same year her female identity was dismissed by the Jerusalem court, Dana International represented Israel in the Eurovision song contest. Though there was some controversy over whether a transgender artist should sing on behalf of the holy land, International won the prize with her song “Viva to the Diva.” As her celebrity grows, Dana International is moving transgender issues into the public eye – even if traditional Judaism still rejects her identity of choice.

“Trans” is a broad term applied to people who do not fit into traditional gender categories. It includes transgender people, who generally behave and identify as the opposite sex from the one into which they were born. Also within this spectrum are transsexuals (people who undergo surgery and hormone therapy to switch genders) and intersexuals (people born with both male and female sexual characteristics). All of these groups have been marginalized within the Jewish community and in Jewish thought.

But change is on the horizon. Hebrew Union College recently ordained Reuben Zellman, an FtM and the first transgender rabbinical student. Zellman sees himself as carrying on a long tradition. “Two thousand years ago,” he explained in a recent sermon, “our forbears were asking the questions that we are just beginning to ask today.” Zellman wasn’t saying that everything was hunky-dory for the transsexuals of yore – just that from early on, Jewish thinkers were grappling with the question of what constitutes gender.
In fact, the Torah’s creation story is, well, the genesis of gender discussion for Jews. Genesis 1.27 says, “And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” Some rabbis say that this shift from singular to plural means the first human being began, literally, as both male and female. This Biblical tidbit is reaffirming for some transgender Jews, allowing them to identify with a gender-ambiguous ancestor and even a gender-ambiguous God. But the verse provides limited encouragement: shortly afterwards, that one ancestor becomes two—a man and a woman—and, gender-bending or no, the verse has, in practice, had no significant influence on halacha.

Adam and Eve’s conveniently defined identities still didn’t stop Jews questioning gender. During the Babylonian period, rabbis identified several sexual categories besides male and female: androgynos, a person with male and female sexual characteristics; tumtum, a person with no sexual characteristics; aylonit, a woman who does not reach sexual maturity by age 20; and saris, a man in the same situation. Some believe these gender categories prove that the rabbis recognized transgender Jews as members of the community. To others, these categories are incomplete—and worse, they recognize only physical characteristics and not behavioral ones.

Regardless, as Dana International’s case shows, halacha does not recognize the identity of transgender individuals. According to Professor David Bleich’s 1977 book Contemporary Halakhic Problems, Jews are forbidden from undergoing surgery to alter their sex. Why? So we can be fruitful and multiply, of course: men are forbidden from undergoing voluntary castration, women from sterilization.

Until recently, transgender Jews have been marginalized within mainstream Judaism. They’ve even been on the sidelines of the Jewish LGBT movement, while a growing number of gay and lesbian Jews are being ordained as reform, reconstructionist, and renewal rabbis, and even a handful of conservative and orthodox rabbis are openly gay. Make no mistake—Jewish law still nixes homosexuality—but an increase in queer Jewish leadership has helped put queer issues on the agenda of many Jewish communities. Transgender Jews have not yet made similar gains. “In most ways,” Zellman says, “transgender people are now where lesbian, gay, and bisexual people were thirty years ago, maybe even fifty years ago.”

Both queer and transgender Jews face potential ostracism from their communities. Both face halachic limitations on their sexual identities. Transgender Jews, however, have even more halachic hurdles to clear. Many mitzvot—like wrapping t’fillin and
participating in a minyan – are gender-specific. And only
transgender Jews must justify which side of the mechitzah – the
partition that divides men’s from women’s sections in the
synagogue – they stand on. Even in less observant congregations,
“gender norms” can put transgender Jews into difficult situations:
should an FtM transsexual be invited to the annual Hadassah
luncheon? These dilemmas might seem insignificant, but they are
very real to Jews seeking religious community.

Both social convention and halacha may be out of step with the
biological identities of transsexuals. Gavriel Levi Ansara – founder
of an organization called Tiferet, which provides resources to
observant LGBT Jews – says that medical studies have “determined
that transsexual identification is biologically based.” These studies,
Gavriel says, confirm that every fetus undergoes multiple stages of
hormonal influx or “hardwiring.” As a result, some peoples’
“neurological sex” – their identity – does not correspond with their
“genital sex” – their body.

How to reconcile ancient law, modern science, and personal
identity? Many Jews argue that it’s possible to be observant without
following every aspect of halacha. On this basis, some Reform,
Reconstructionist, Renewal, and, to a lesser extent, Conservative
communities welcome transgender congregants. Some synagogues’
mission statements encourage people of all gender identities to join.
Others are adapting Jewish rituals such as mikveh immersions with
and for transgender congregants.

Much remains to be done. But with Zellman and International
leading the way, change can’t be far behind.

Resources on transgender issues in Judaism:
Queer Jews anthology, eds David Shneer and Caryn Aviv
Queer Theory and the Jewish Question, eds Daniel Boyarin, Daniel
Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini
Lilith Magazine, Spring 2002
The Trans-Jews List-Serve: trans-jews-owner@groups.queernet.org

Leah Koenig is a recent graduate of Middlebury College. She splits her time
between Hazon, a Jewish environmental non-profit, and the Jewish Life
Network. She is also an intern with Zeek. She can be reached at
lkoenig23@yahoo.com.

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BeMidbar

It took so long, so long. Row after row, man after man, and Moshe had to number each one, he himself, with the head of each tribe. The descendants of Reuben, of Simeon, of Judah, of Issachar. The descendants of Zebulon, Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin, Dan, Asher, Gad and finally of Naphthali. This one, and this one, and this one, and this one, and this one. In the numbering each was equal, age and height and weight and wisdom and wit all forgotten, just “one, one, one, one, one,” all of those who were of an age to take the field.

Each day we rose and broke the fast, and watched the count. One, and one, and one, all day, until we ate the evening meal. The children were restless, the herds were neglected, the unmoving camp grew odorous with our leavings, and still they counted.

Eighteen times the sun rose and set, and then they were finished.

We were ready. Moses would know how to apportion the land we had been promised. He would know what troops he had, and who would lead them.

And then, everything changed.

Adonai could not forgive, when our scouts returned shaking with fear of those we must dispossess to gain what would be ours. Moshe said they lacked faith. In truth, we all lacked faith. We had left Egypt, but Egypt was still in us. We could not envision being the conquerors rather than the conquered. We were not ready.

There would be no battles, no land to allot, not in our lifetimes. The wilderness was to be our parsha, until the last slave died. We would not enter the promised land—not even Moshe.

And so, we live between. Between escape and arrival. Between emancipation and freedom. Between the land we left and the land where we are going. We live BeMidbar—in the wilderness.

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How terrible it must have been to that first generation, after all the preparation. Liberated, free to journey, but condemned to journey without end. At times it surely must have seemed like there was no purpose to life.

For those who left Egypt, that time of wandering was their forever. Yet it was but a moment—a very critical moment—in our history. It lasted long enough that most of the Torah is set in the wilderness, as Rabbi Elliot Kukla points out. In the space and time of wandering, between the known and the hoped for, we had the room to listen to God speak. We had the space to change, to transform, to become a people.

Were we, then, condemned by being made to wander, or were we given a gift?

I, too, live BeMidbar, in the desert. Well into middle age, I discovered that the gender which I had always inhabited was for me a mitzrayim. I discovered that yes, female-bodied people could be transgendered, that it didn’t always work the other way. I escaped from an existence that pinched and choked. And there I was and am, in the wilderness, not female, yet not male, a complexly-gendered wanderer. I do not know if I will reach a destination, or only a time when my journeying must inevitably end.

Yet the wilderness is peaceful, and there are places of beauty along the way.

And I am so glad to be out of Egypt.

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