Trans-Competency

Flier for Kolot Chayeinu Class Announcement—2007

Making Your Jewish Congregation or Community More Trans Friendly—Pamphlet—Rabbi Elliot Kukla and Reuben Zelman

Trans-Etiquette 101—Micah Bazant, Transtorah, 2002


Room to Grow: Jewish Education for Men, Women, and Everybody Else—Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla, 2007 delivered at the Union of Reform Judaism’s Symposium on Gender and Jewish Education and used during Kolot Chayeinu class in 2007, Transtorah
Curious About Judaism’s Take on Gender?

The sages gave this some serious thought: Jewish sacred texts recognize six different categories for gender diversity.

Kolot Chayeinu’s mission and value statements now recognize “differing gender identities” as part of our hallmark diversity. Learn how you can begin to put this idea into practice and develop a fuller understanding of gender diversity in Judaism:

“A Created Being of Its Own”: Gender Diversity in Judaism

A three-part class with Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

March 15, 22 and 29th at 7 P.M.

At Kolot Chayeinu, 1012 8th Avenue, (between 10th & 11th Streets) Brooklyn
Co-sponsored by Jews for Racial and Economic Justice

• Explore the spiritual implications of a broadened understanding of sex and gender in Judaism

• Look at the theological implications of the texts for people of all genders.

• Begin to think how we could make this community more welcoming to transgender, gender nonconforming and intersex people

The sessions on March 15th and 22nd are open to the public. March 29 is for Kolot members only to answer questions and explore how we can apply this learning to making our community even more welcoming of gender diversity. Topics covered will include: education, ritual, liturgy, political action and outreach.

Sliding Scale: $36-$90 (for three classes).
No one turned away for inability to pay.
Info? E-mail: rebellen@earthlink.net.

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1 Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla was ordained by Hebrew Union College in 2006 and is currently the rabbi of the Danforth Jewish Circle in Toronto. He has been involved in transgender activism and education since 2000. He is currently co-creating a transgender resource library for Jewish Mosaic: National Center for Gender and Sexual Diversity (www.jewishmosaic.org) and helping to launch a website of educational and liturgical resources: www.transtorah.org (summer, 2007) His writing on gender issues will appear in next month’s issue of Lilith Magazine, as well as Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call to Justice (Jewish Lights, September 2007) and Kulanu: All of Us (Union for Reform Judaism Press (spring 2007).
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 get 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
Synagogues and other Jewish organizations are beginning to make changes and develop programming ideas to make their community more trans-friendly and to help educate members about trans-gender experiences. The following are examples of some steps that synagogues have taken to become more educated and welcoming.

**Language**
In flyers, newsletters, announcements, sermons etc., instead of writing “men and women welcome” or “for both men and women,” try “all genders welcome” or “for all genders.”

**Facilities**
Consider whether all of your facility’s restrooms must be gender-specific or whether one could be made available to everyone. This need not be complicated; covering the “men” or “women” sign with “all-gender restroom” is sufficient. Remember to do this for temporary, shared, or rental facilities also.

**Ritual**
- Consider how comfortable a trans person might be marking a wedding, b’nei mitzvah, conversion, loss, or other life cycle event in your congregation. How open could they be about their identity during the process? What about from the bimah?
- Transgender people often experience particular life-cycle events such as a gender change or a name change. Some wish to mark these events in a Jewish way, either publicly or privately. Consider how open your community is to developing new rituals or adapting existing ones.
- It is important to be especially sensitive around vulnerable experiences such as the mikveh or illness. The best approach is to listen carefully to the needs that the trans person expresses and to accommodate those to the greatest possible extent – even if it’s not the way things are “usually” done.

**Education**
- Invite the community to a panel discussion, workshop or other event that will open up dialogue.
- Offer an adult education class or sermon about trans issues in general or about trans and intersex issues in Jewish text or Jewish community.
- If another organization is putting on a trans-related program, offer to host it, co-sponsor it, or advertise it.
- Consider what messages are conveyed in your religious school or children’s programs about gender and gender roles.

**Political and Social Action**
- Include transgender and gender diversity issues as part of your community’s social action work. There are many transgender community services and advocacy organizations that are in great need of our support.

**Outreach**
- Make sure to publicize changes that your congregation is making, as well as programs that you are planning. This will help to let trans people know that your community cares about being an affirming place for them.
- Consider an outreach plan. The world at large is not very welcoming to transgender people. Therefore, trans people often assume that they are not welcome or included – unless it is stated otherwise.

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“And God created the human being in God’s own image...”

— Genesis 1:27

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WHAT DOES ‘TRANSGENDER’ MEAN?

Transgender or trans is a broad term that can encompass anyone who doesn’t identify with the gender that they were assigned at birth. This includes people who take medical steps to modify their appearance and those who do not.

Some transmen and transwomen identify completely with their preferred gender (for example, they may have been assigned male gender at birth and raised as a boy but now see themselves as completely female), while other trans people may identify with an alternate gender identity that is neither male nor female.

WHAT’S AT STAKE?

Transphobia, the fear of gender variation in society, impacts all parts of life. Children who do not gender-conform are often met with physical, verbal and sexual cruelty and are sometimes forced to drop out of school, while youth are frequently disowned by their families and lose economic support. Transgender adults face discrimination in employment, healthcare and many social services.

The Jewish community is equally impacted by transphobia. As a result, many trans and gender nonconforming individuals feel unwelcome in synagogue and unable to access spiritual care or support.

WHAT DOES JEWISH TRADITION SAY?

Although Jewish Sages often tried to sort the world into binaries, they also acknowledged that not all parts of God’s creation can be contained within human categories. Jewish sacred texts include a wide range of gender diversity.

Two gender variant figures – the tumtum and the androgyynos – appear more than 200 times in the Babylonian Talmud alone. According to one midrash, the first human being was an androgyynos, while the Talmud teaches that Abraham and Sarah, the first Jews, were tumtunim. Most centrally, Jewish tradition teaches that people of all genders are created b’tzelem Elohim, in the image of God (Gen. 1:27.)

ASKING QUESTIONS

The first question to ask about someone else’s gender is: “Do I really need to know?” In most situations, a person’s gender is not relevant. For example, if someone walks into Shabbat services and their gender is unclear, there is almost certainly no reason to ask or comment in any way. The person is there to pray and to be among community. They can be welcomed without knowing what their gender identity is.

If you decide that you do need to know or understand something about someone else’s gender, appropriate and respectful questions include: “What pronoun do you prefer?” or “Is there anything I/we/the community can do to make this a more comfortable place?” It is inappropriate to ask about our bodies, our medical history, or how our families feel about our gender.

FOR MORE INFORMATION & RESOURCES:

This is just a starter list - there are hundreds of transgender organizations, films, books, etc. that can provide more information.

TransTorah – www.transtorah.org
(coming in Summer 2007)
Educational, pastoral and liturgical resources to help congregations and Jewish communities become more trans-friendly, as well as spiritual resources for trans and gender nonconforming individuals.

Jewish Mosaic: The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity – www.jewishmosiac.org
Mosaic is currently creating a transgender resource library which will be open to the public soon.

The National Center for Transgender Equality – www.nctequality.org
This website includes 52 things you can do for transgender equality for use in your community group.

The Sylvia Rivera Law Project – www.srlp.org
SRLP’s website includes educational and training materials as well as good information on the social and legal impacts of transphobia.

The Intersex Society of North America – www.isna.org
People who are intersex have face different issues than trans people. ISNA is the primary organization offering national intersex support, education and advocacy.
Room to Grow:
Jewish Education for Men, Women, and Everybody Else
by Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla, 2007
delivered at the Union of Reform Judaism’s Symposium on Gender And Jewish Education
on Dec 11, 2007

Opening Experiential Exercise

A. For each of the following statements stand up if you agree. Then take a moment to look
around the room and notice who you share this experience with and who you have
differences with:

• I like to cook
• I like to fix things
• I sometimes wear a kippah
• I light Shabbat candles
• I like the color pink
• I have been told not to cry
• I usually wear pants
• I have pretended to be less intelligent than I am to protect someone else’s ego
• I have felt nervous walking home alone at night because of my gender or sexuality
• As a child I liked to play with dolls
• As a child I liked to climb trees
• As a part of my education I was encouraged (by peers, parents and/or teachers) to
abandon activities or hobbies I enjoyed because they didn’t “match” my gender
• As a part of my education I was encouraged to pursue activities or hobbies I didn’t
enjoy because they did “match” my gender
• I feel like my gender has not limited my education in any way
• I would like to feel like my gender does not limit my on-going education in any way

B. Now turn to the person to your right and spend a few minutes discussing what you
noticed while doing this activity: Any surprises? Any moments that felt uncomfortable,
“Aha!” moments?
Room To Grow: Jewish Education for Men, Women and Everybody Else

Over the past few years I have had the opportunity to teach about gender diversity in Judaism at a number of synagogues and schools across the US. I almost always start with an exercise similar to the one we just did. I have worked with groups of a variety of ages, from a large cross-section of the Jewish religious spectrum. I have found that in almost every group no two people answer these questions in exactly the same way. Each one of us has a unique gender “story” and a highly individual way of expressing our gender in the world.

I have also discovered that although different communities have very different gender roles and expectations for their members, most of us would like to feel like our gender does not limit us in being fully seen, respected and included in our communities. At the same time, most of us have felt like at some point in our lives we were either punished for “gender inappropriate” behavior or rewarded for “conforming” to the gender expectations of our communities. Each of us has been shaped by the way our society expects men and women to behave in both positive and negative ways.

“Who would you be,” asks activist Pat Califia, “if you had never been punished for gender inappropriate behavior? What would it be like to walk down the street, go to work or attend a party and take it for granted that the gender of the people you met would not be the first thing you ascertained about them? What would happen if we all helped each other to manifest our most beautiful, intelligent, creative, and adventurous inner selves, instead of cooperating to suppress them?”

For the next hour or so I want us to try to imagine this world, where there is more space for people of all genders and sexualities to explore our multi-faceted humanity. What would our educational environments look like if there was the space for everyone to explore the limitless potential for change and diversity that God created within us? Allowing room to grow in Reform Jewish education does not just mean finding a way to embrace tomboyish girls and effeminate boys. It also means creating space for butch lesbian moms, single dads and transgender members of our youth groups. And it means simultaneously making space for the girly girl who wants to wear dresses every day and the boy who wants to be rough and tough.

Jewish education where there is room to grow, means space for each of us to be whole. If we can bring our full selves to our education we will be able to learn to our full capacity. As it says in Proverbs: “Hanoch la’na’ar al pi darco, gam ki yazkin lo yasur menah” Teach a child in his own way when he is young and when he grows older he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6).

Furthermore, if we make space for more ways of expressing our gender it also creates room for more ways of being human. When we push at the boundaries of rigid gender distinctions
we can (and I think should) also push at other boundaries in our education and ask questions about the messages communicated about Non-Jewish parents in our learning materials; how cultural and racial diversity is dealt with in our classrooms and how accessible our buildings are to people with disabilities. A recent study of Colorado’s Jewish community done by Jewish Mosaic: National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity showed that Jewish institutions which are welcoming of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender variant people tend to be open and welcoming of all Jews. As one participant in the study stated, “Being open and welcoming is a sign of a healthy Jewish institution.”

What’s At Stake?

We live in a world where it is generally assumed that there are two ways to be human. From before we are born people ask “is it a boy or a girl?” From the moment of birth onward most facets of our life – the clothes we are told to wear, the activities we are anticipated to like, the careers and hobbies we are encouraged to pursue, the loving relationships we are expected to have – are guided by the answer to this crucial question. The past few decades of feminist organizing have deeply questioned whether we can (or should) see gender as an essential way to divide up humanity. And yet most of us 21st century people were still raised to believe that whether we are a girl or a boy is the most simple, and unchangeable, fact of our existence.

There are countless people in our communities who are excluded in varying degrees and ways by this rigid understanding of gender. There is the eight year old boy who was suspended from school for wearing his ballet tutu to class; the teacher who was fired because of her refusal to wear make-up and the masculine lesbian mom who was shouted at and harassed in a synagogue women’s restroom.

The fear of gender variance in society, impacts all parts of life. Children who do not gender-conform are often met with physical, verbal and sexual cruelty and are sometimes forced to drop out of school, while youth are frequently disowned by their families and lose economic support systems. Transgender adults face significant obstacles to accessing employment, healthcare, police protection and other essential services. In 2005, Ronnie Paris Jr., a three year old boy, was beaten to death by his father for being a “sissy.” This story illustrates the fact that rigidly held gender norms lead to multiple types of violence and oppression.

Sadly, despite our desire to create welcoming educational environments, some of these larger social issues impact our schools. According to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network’s (GLSN) 2005 National School Climate Survey, two thirds of LGBT students report being verbally or physically harassed at school because of their perceived sexual orientation or gender presentation. Three quarters of students surveyed for this nationwide study reported feeling unsafe in school. This led, as we might expect, to negative impacts on their school performance.
These statistics may be news to many of us who are sitting here today, even full-time educators, because these same students rarely report incidents of verbal and physical harassment to school authorities or parents, in part because they doubt any action will be taken. This perception is fueled by the fact that nearly 20% of respondents reported hearing homophobic and transphobic remarks from faculty and staff, and over 83% reported that faculty and staff do not regularly intervene when they hear anti-LGBT language.

This well-respected survey included a broad range of private and public schools. Jewish education is not immune to these wider problems. A survey of seven Jewish day schools conducted in 2003 by Rachel Timoner, now a rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College, found that “almost every Jewish day school reported anti-gay name-calling, teasing, harassment, or use of gay epithets.” Timoner’s research also found that “gay and lesbian students and teachers in Jewish day schools reported experiences of ostracism and judgment.” The lack of response from educators, rabbis, and other authority figures is pervasive. “Teachers, students, or parents complained of discrimination, invisibility, harassment, or a ‘deafening’ silence,” the report found.

Sexual orientation and gender identity is not the same thing: sexuality refers to our desires, while gender identity refers to our inner sense of self. However, if we listen to the stories underlying many of these statistics we discover that it is often expectations for gender conformity and the fear of overstepping gender boundaries, which elicits both homophobic and transphobic responses in our schools. Much of the mistreatment of gay, lesbian, bisexual, as well as transgender and gender variant people stems from the deeply held belief that there are only two completely opposite ways to be created in God’s image – male or female.

**How I Met the Tumtum**

I believe that Judaism provides us with the spiritual resources we need to build a different kind of world. The rabbis of the Mishna who lived in the first two centuries of the Common Era, identify two sexes beyond male and female called the “tumtum” and the “androgynos.” The Mishna never clearly defines these terms, but the Sages of the Talmud see the tumtum as a person whose sex traits are obscured making it difficult to discern whether the tumtum should be classified as male or female. The androgynos is a person who has both male and female sexual traits. These figures appear frequently in classical Jewish texts – the tumtum and androgynos appear over 200 times in the Babylonian Talmud alone! And yet gender diversity is seldom discussed as an integral part of Jewish sacred texts or as a spiritual resource of our tradition.

The first time I encountered the tumtum I was 19 years old, new to classical Jewish study and learning in an orthodox Yeshiva. I found a startling text from the Mishna buried in a sheaf of handouts which referred to the tumtum as a possible sex assignment for a newborn infant. As
soon as I read this text I called over my teacher and excitedly asked her: “Who is this tumtum?” “Oh,” she answered, “The tumtum is a mythical beast that is neither male nor female – kind of like a unicorn.” Even though I knew next to nothing about Jewish texts and traditions, I had a feeling that my teacher might be wrong. I had spent a lifetime feeling homeless and adrift between the modern categories of “male” and “female” and when I met the tumtum I felt like I had found myself in the texts.

It has now been 14 years since I first met the tumtum. In a sense I have come a long way. I have spent those years immersed in Jewish texts and traditions, at the same time as exploring my own gender identity. In spring 2006 I both came out as transgender and was ordained as a rabbi by Hebrew Union College. However, in other ways, not much has changed since that first encounter. I still recognize the tumtum whenever we meet in the text and I am still surrounded by voices that deny that the tumtum and I really exist.

As a new rabbi, an educator and a chaplain, I have had the privilege to talk to numerous people who (in one way or another) can’t or won’t fit within modern binary genders. Each of these individuals has confirmed that we do exist both in Jewish sacred tradition and in contemporary communities. Every one of these encounters has pushed me to find Jewish resources that shed light on our struggles. I, in turn, have become more and more convinced that Judaism offers us the seeds of a liberation theology for men, women, transgender people and everyone else that can transform Reform educational and spiritual institutions.

There are many ways to read these texts and the Sages’ approach is very far from perfect. They certainly do not argue for sex and gender liberation, as some of us might wish that they had. But they also never question whether gender diversity really exists, or whether gender-nonconforming people should be seen and recognized within our study houses and sanctuaries.

In the Babylonian Talmud we learn the story of a tumtum who becomes a parent of seven children (Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 83b). In the same tractate the radical claim is made that the first ancestors of the Jewish people – Abraham and Sarah – were actually originally tumtumim. According to this text, they only later transitioned genders to become male and female (BT Yevamot 64a). We learn in the Midrash that Adam HaRishon, the first human being created in the image of God, was actually an androgynos.

Chapter 4 of Mishna Bikkurim is wholly concerned with the ritual and civil status of the androgynos. We read: “the androgynos in some ways legally equivalent to men, in some ways legally equivalent to women, in some ways legally equivalent to both men and women and in some ways legally equivalent to neither men nor women.” (Mishna Bikkurim 4: 1) Through out this chapter our Sages take care to define the ways that the androgynos deserves protection and the ways in which life is holy for the androgynos.
At the end of this chapter of Mishna, Rabbi Yossi offers the opinion that the androgynos is: “Bri’a b’ifnei atzmah hoo” (he is a created being of her own.) This Hebrew term blends male and female pronouns to poetically express the complexity of the androgynos’ identity. The term “Bri’a b’ifnei atzmah” is a classical Jewish legal term for exceptionality. The koi, an animal that is neither wild nor domesticated, is referred to by the same phrase (Tosefta Bikkurim 2).

This term is an acknowledgement that not all of creation can be understood within binary systems.

Jewish Sages often tried to sort the world into binaries however they also recognized that not all parts of God’s creation can be contained in orderly boxes. Distinctions between Jews and non-Jews; Shabbat and the days of the week; purity and impurity, are crucial to Jewish tradition. However, it was the parts of the universe that defied binaries that interested the rabbis of the Mishna and the Talmud the most. Pages and pages of sacred texts are occupied with the minute details of the moment between fruit and bud, wildness and domestication, innocence and maturity, the twilight hour between day and night.

We read in the Babylonian Talmud: “Our sages taught: As to twilight, it is doubtful whether it is part day and part night, or whether all of it is day or all of it is night…. Rabbi Yosi said: Twilight is like the twinkling of an eye as night enters and the day departs, and it is impossible to determine its length.” (Shabbat 34b) We might have thought that the ambiguity of twilight would have made it dangerous or forbidden within Jewish tradition. But in fact our Sages determined that dawn and dusk, the in-between moments, are the best times for prayer. (Babylonian Talmud Brachot 29b)

Jewish tradition acknowledges that some parts of God’s creation defy categories and that these liminal people, places and things are often the sites of the most intense holiness. After all, the word for holiness in Hebrew, “kedusha”, literally means set aside or out of the ordinary. Transgender activist and HUC rabbinical student Reuben Zellman says: “Twilight cannot be defined; it can only be sanctified and appreciated. People can’t always be defined; they can only be seen and respected, and their lives made holy. This Jewish approach allows for genders beyond male and female. It opens space in society. And it protects those who live in the places in between.”

**Education for girls, boys, men, women, intersex and trans people, and everybody else**

When I teach these texts at synagogues and schools I am frequently asked about the “Nafka Mina”: what is the practical implication of these texts? The boundaries around gender and sexuality have certainly shifted through-out history. It is certainly true that an exact equivalence cannot be made between pre-modern gender diversity in Jewish sacred texts and contemporary gender-variant lives. However, it is important to note that identities beyond, or on the edges of, male and female have existed across millennia and discussions of pre-modern
gender diversity can inform and enrich the way we think about the space we create for gender variance in contemporary communities.

Most importantly, I think that these texts demonstrate that it is a Jewish value to question our assumptions about the basic ways we divide up humanity in every era. Reform Judaism has always tried to reach out to those of us who are marginalized. We have led the way in opening the doors of Jewish tradition to women, Jews by choice, and interfaith families. But we are just beginning to find ways to embrace those who break down mainstream gender lines.

So how do we open up space in our educational environments for people of all genders and sexualities to learn? Expand the horizons of our classrooms is a lifetime project. However, as a way to begin the conversation I would like to share with you five practical suggestions for Jewish educators of “dos and don’ts” that I adapted from a longer list created by Dr. David Shneer of Jewish Mosaic.

1. **DO avoid “opposites.”** If you need to randomly divide up your classroom for team activities don’t simply say “girls over here” and “Boys over there.” While there may be some circumstances when it makes sense to offer single-gendered activities, using this as a random way to divide up a classroom reinforces the idea that gender is the most salient part of our identity and creates discomfort for gender nonconforming children, youth and adults.

   Furthermore, focusing on opposites when teaching Hebrew, such as Hebrew learning games emphasizing “abba” and “ima” encourage students to think in binaries rather than in inclusive spectra. Binaries are almost always exclusive rather than inclusive and make presumptions about society that do not generally work in pluralistic classrooms. If you do use an “abba-ima” game, you as the teacher should be the one to break the binary by offering an example involving an “abba-abba.”

2. **Do not make assumptions about your students’ family structures or backgrounds.** Don’t assume that all of your students have two parents (let alone just a mother and a father). If they do have a mother and a father, don’t assume that the mother is the primary care-giver. Furthermore, don’t assume that all of your students have parents that are Jewish or that all your students are Ashkenazi. Let the students tell you their own family narratives. When we make room for these stories we discover just how diverse the Jewish community and our classrooms have become.

3. **DO teach Classical Jewish texts that offer complex visions of sexuality and gender.** There are a number of texts, that you are probably teaching already, that can be used to highlight gender and sexual diversity in Judaism. Teach both of the Creation stories from Genesis: the first where man and woman are created simultaneously and
perhaps even in the same body as an androgynos (Genesis 1:27), and then the more well-known story of Eve emerging from Adam’s rib. Teaching both stories and the rabbinic commentary that surrounds them, shows that the Torah encourages a wide range of interpretations and highlights a more gender-inclusive vision of creation.

Do explore the same-gender relationships found in the Bible. Although David is a classic character in “heroes” curricula, his deep love for Jonathan, sexual or not, is rarely discussed. Also include Ruth and Naomi in your list of heroes, and discuss the possibility of their relationship as an intimate one.

4. **DO encourage the uncomfortable laughter that can come from posing examples involving gender crossing.** However, as Dr. Shneer highlights, it is very important that the teacher be the one to offer up the uncomfortable example, not the shy student with same-sex parents or the child who is silently questioning her or his gender. For example, for a Purim play a male teacher can offer to play the role of Esther. If students respond with statements like “but boys can’t play Esther,” the teacher should acknowledge and address the discomfort of the students and ask them what it is that makes them feel uncomfortable. The students are then forced to examine inclusion and consider a range of alternatives.

In doing this educators should be sensitive to the fact that it is still generally much harder for boys, than for girls to blur gender lines. Although it is now acceptable in many Reform communities for girls to play tough sports and women to be rabbis, it would still be shocking in most synagogues and Jewish schools to see boys openly playing with dolls or male teachers crying in public. The reasons behind this are too complex to explore right now, but I think that it is connected to the persistence of sexism in our society which continues to see “feminine” activities as degrading.

5. **DO include visual representations of LGBT people or families and people with diverse gender expressions.** When doing units on family, communities, or history, provide a broad range of options. This is one concrete way that we begin to create a world that looks different and is more embracing of difference.

**Created Beings of Our Own**

Small steps like these begin to create the space for a different kind of world where all of us have room to grow and express ourselves. Synagogues and schools where gender nonconformity is regularly seen in public, has a huge impact on students. Take a moment to consider how comfortable your community would be with seeing a bar mitzvah boy with long hair? Are female rabbis in your synagogue expected to wear skirts on the *bimah*? How comfortable would a male teacher be wearing earrings to teach in your school?
Last year at Kol Nidre services I delivered a sermon on the power of diversity. Afterwards, in the swirling crowd I felt someone tug at my jacket. I turned around to find a nine-year old boy in lavender shiny “power puffs” sneakers. “I really liked your sermon,” he whispered before disappearing into the crowd. During Sukkot his mom told me that he had been hassled about his shoes at school all week, but after hearing my sermon he had decided to keep wearing them. I don’t think it was my words that impacted him, but the visual power of a gender non-conforming rabbi on the bimah.

Wearing lavender sneakers may seem like a small statement. But I don’t think it is in the fourth grade. I see this boy as incredibly brave. It is this type of insistence in being fully ourselves in the face of adversity, which world change is built upon. Classrooms where nine year old boys can wear lavender sneakers are one step toward creating a society where each and every one of us can grow to our full potential.

In the Mishna, when Rabbi Yossi refers to the androgynos as a “Bri’a b’ifnei atzmah”, a created being of its own I believe he is making a theological statement. God creates diversity that is far too complex for human beings to understand. There are parts of each of us that are uncontainable. Every one of us must be appreciated as a “created being of our own” and educated with care and respect so that we are given the space to evolve into the unique manifestation of God’s own image that we are meant to be.
Trans Etiquette/Respect/Support 101

by Micah Bazant, 2002
updated from Timtum: A Trans Jew Zine

Please use freely and widely, and acknowledge the source. Add and subtract from this document as needed. Please send suggestions, feedback, etc. to info@timtum.net.

I am using the word ‘trans’ in the broadest sense, to include labels like genderqueer, transgender and transsexual. This was written from my own experience as a white transperson/ftm who is perceived as both female and male. Of course, every trans person is different, and would write this list differently. Also, some things, which are totally inappropriate with strangers or acquaintances, may be fine or welcomed in the context of a trusting relationship. For example, healthcare providers and partners of transpeople need to know and discuss trans-related things that wouldn’t be ok to discuss in a more casual relationship. This list is written primarily for acquaintances, friends, co-workers, etc.

I’m sad to say that I’ve done most of the things on this list at some point in my life, and had most of them done to me even by other trans people. As with other forms of oppression, they are socialized into us from birth. We are all taught to be transphobic, and unlearning it is a process and a responsibility.

Pronouns and Self-Identification

Respect everyone’s self-identification. Call everyone by their preferred name/s and pronoun/s. Use language and behavior that is appropriate to their gender self-identification. Do this for everyone, all the time, no matter how much you think they deviate from what a “real man” or “real woman” should be.

What we truly know ourselves to be should be the only determinant of our gender in society. Set aside your doubts, start educating yourself and respect that we are who we say we are. By doing this you are saying: “I see you, I support you, I respect you.” By not doing this, you let trans people know: “I don’t understand you and I’m not trying to. What you tell me about yourself is not important, all that’s important is how I think of you. I am not your ally. You are not safe with me.” Being referred to or treated as the wrong gender feels painful and disrespectful to us.

It’s hard and dangerous to change your name and pronoun. Know that it has taken a lot of courage for this person to let you know who they really are; they are sharing something very
precious. It may seem hard or silly to you at first, but it can be a matter of life and death for us.

If you don’t know what pronouns or gender-labels someone prefers (and there’s no mutual friend around to clue you in), just ask them. Politely. And respectfully. For example: “What pronoun do you prefer?” or “How do you like to be referred to, in terms of gender?”

Usually when people can’t immediately determine someone’s gender, they become afraid and hostile. If you misrecognize someone’s gender, it’s okay, don’t freak out. Apologize once and get it right the next time. Misidentifying or being unable to classify someone’s gender does not have to be an awkward or shameful experience. By asking someone in the right way, you can indirectly communicate: ‘I want to be respectful of you and I don’t want to make any assumptions. I see your gender ambiguity and/or fluid gender expression as a positive, fabulous, creative and honest (need I go on?) thing.’

Some transpeople are bravely making more space for gender diversity by using language creatively. Respect these efforts and don’t dismiss them as silly, funny, weird or too difficult. (Remember Mahatma Ghandi’s words: “First they ignored us, then they laughed at us, then they tried to fight us, then we won.”) For example, some people prefer to be referred to as ‘they’, or as both ‘he’ and ‘she’ interchangeably. Some people prefer to be referred to only by their name. Some people use non-binary pronouns like ‘ze’ and ‘hir’.

Invasive Questions

Medical Information: You do NOT have the right to know any medical or anatomical information about anyone else’s body, unless they decide to share it with you. This means: don’t ask about their genitals, their surgeries, the effects of their hormones, etc. This is private! The first question usually asked to transpeople is, “Do you have a penis?” or “Do you have a vagina?” Would you ask a non-trans person about their genitals? To do so is incredibly invasive and disrespectful. It reduces us to one body part, as if all the rest of our minds, hearts, bodies, contributions and personalities are not important. Our bodies are not a community forum, or a tool to educate you!

Also, don’t ask us about our surgeries, medications, etc. If we want you to know about something, we’ll bring it up. For example, just because your friend-of-a friend-of-a-transperson told you that someone is having surgery, doesn’t mean you have a right to come up and ask them about it (especially in front of other people).

Don’t ask us if we’ve had a “sex change operation.” Gender transition doesn’t happen through one magic operation. And the operation you’re thinking of probably involves transforming our genitals, which, again, is reductive and disrespectful. Some of us never want
to have any surgeries. Some of us desperately want surgery and can’t afford it or don’t have access to it. For a lot of female-to-male transpeople the surgeries they would want don’t exist.

Even if you’re curious, don’t interrogate us. **It’s not our job to educate you** and we may not feel like answering your incredibly personal questions right now. Unless we bring it up, don’t ask us how our gender is affecting our personal relationships. For example, if you just met me, **don’t ask me how my family is taking it.**

**If you want to find out more about trans bodies or our families**, educate yourself through books, websites, films, etc.

**Out-ing**

‘Trans people have a huge range of ways that we navigate the world, based on preference and necessity. Transphobia functions very differently than homophobia; being ‘out’ is not necessarily desirable or possible for us. Being a trans ally means supporting people in being more safe and healthy – which may mean anything between letting everyone they meet know they are trans, to keeping their gender history entirely confidential. Its crucial to support people in being as ‘out’, or not, as they need to be.

There are many situations in which being ‘out’ could have serious negative repercussions; transpeople are killed every year just because other people find out they are trans. Revealing someone’s trans status could cost them a job, a relationship, or their physical safety.

Many transpeople are perceived 100% of the time as their preferred gender, and no one would ever suspect they had been through a gender transition at some point. Some of these folks prefer never to be ‘out’ as trans and, in fact, may not even consider themselves ‘trans.’ This is a completely valid choice among the huge spectrum of gender diversity. If you know someone who’s trans experience is completely private, respect them by honoring that privacy.

Do not assume that just because you know us in one way, that we are able to, or choose to, live that way in every other part of our lives. Some of us express our gender in different ways in different parts of our lives. For example, we may not be able to find work as the gender we truly are. Or we may only find peace by living some of the time in a more masculine gender and some of the time as more feminine.

For myself, even though I hate being called “she,” if someone refers to me that way, I might or might not correct them depending on many variables: whether I’m going to have to see them again, how confident I feel, who I’m with, how much backup I have, etc.

Think about when and why you ‘out’ someone as trans. Are you talking about your ‘trans
friend’ just to prove how open and hip you are? Is it necessary to out this person, or are you doing it for your own personal reasons?

Names

Names are very powerful things. For a lot of trans people, the names given to us by our parents represent a gender identity which was wrong, humiliating and forced. Changing our names carries a lot more weight than it does for non-trans people. Don’t ask someone what their old name was. And don’t ask if our current names are our ‘given names’, or worse yet, ‘real names.’ If someone wants you to know, they will tell you. If you know someone’s old name, don’t share it with other people.

Some transpeople go by multiple names, because they are in transition, or because they prefer it that way. Again, don’t trip about it. Just ask them what they prefer to be called and then call them that, every time. It may seem strange to you, but it’s completely normal for us.

Also, don’t make comments about the gender associations of trans people’s names. This is especially annoying in a cross-cultural context. A name that means (or sounds like) ‘Badass warrior king’ in one language, might mean (or sound like) ‘Nellie flower picker’ in another. Don’t assume that you know what meanings or gender implications our names have.

Transition

Don’t assume that our gender transitions are linear, one-way, or start or end at a fixed point. For example, some intersex1 people (who aren’t “born male” or “born female”) have trans experiences, and may also identify as trans. Some transpeople, for example, may express themselves as masculine, feminine and then back to masculine. In an ideal world this would be no different than having long hair, then short hair, then long again.

There are infinite ways to transition. Things like binding, packing, tucking, electrolysis, hormones, surgery, or changing our name, legal ‘sex’ and pronoun, are some of the possible steps of a gender transition. Trans people have the right to make all, some or none of these changes, and in any order.

1 In this context, ‘passing’ refers to trans people being perceived as non-trans members of the gender with which they identify. While this is a goal for most trans people, I think its important to stay aware of the systemic power imbalance that is implicit in this term. I prefer the term ‘being passed,’ because it emphasizes the fact that trans people do not have total control over how we are perceived, and that the power in the equation of passing lies completely with the non-trans person who ‘passes’ us. It is something done to us, not something we are able to control.
Do not ask us if we are sure, or remind us that our transition is irreversible and that we may regret our changes. Do not tell us we are coming out as trans just to be ‘trendy’. We have usually been thinking about and dealing with our gender issues for a long time, although we may not have shared our years of internal torment with you. We are aware of, and probably very excited about, the consequences of our decisions.

Do not tell us how you liked us (or certain things about us) better before we transitioned. There is a normal and healthy grieving process that people go through around any major change, including gender changes by people in our lives. It’s important to acknowledge and deal with your feelings, but not with us. We are going through enough stress, and we really just need your support.

Do not tell us how hard this is for you or how uncomfortable we make you. However challenging it may feel to you, it’s much harder to live as a transperson. Many many people become amazing trans allies and effortlessly call all their trans friends by the right names and pronouns. You can too, its really not that hard - its just a different way of thinking about gender. If you are uncomfortable with someone’s gender, find ways to work on it yourself or with other, knowledgeable non-trans friends.

Passing and being passed

Don’t judge our ability to be seen as male or female. For example, don’t say: “Maybe if you did _______, or didn’t do ________, you’d pass better, and we would be able to accept your gender better.” Also, it is not always appropriate to compliment people on how well they pass. Whether or not we are passed as the gender we prefer is often a matter of money and genetics, not desire or determination. We are not all seeking to pass in the same ways, for the same reasons, or at all! These comments are divisive to trans communities. They reinforce straight, binary gender standards by labeling certain traits (and people) as ‘good’ and ‘real’.

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Fetishization/Tokenization

Yes, it’s true, trans people are all incredibly sexy in our own unique individual ways, but don’t fetishize and tokenize us. Don’t tell us how you love FTMs because we were socialized female and therefore we aren’t like “real men.” While this may be true for some individuals, FTMs are just as diverse as any other group. Many transmen identify as “real men” who are just as (or more) masculine than people assigned male at birth. Don’t tell us how MTFs are the ideal sex partners because they are “chicks with dicks.”

Don’t expect any one of us to speak for all trans people. Don’t assume that you know about trans issues because you once knew a trans person. If we are offended by something you do, listen, apologize and reflect – don’t excuse your bad behavior by saying that your other trans friend didn’t mind. Don’t showcase us as tokens of diversity in your social circle or annual report, without being a real friend or truly integrating transpeople into your organization.

Transphobia + sexism + racism + classism = a big slimy mess

It is a stereotype that all trans people are sexist: that all MTFs are still “really men” and still have male privilege, and that all FTMs are becoming men because of their internalized sexism. Trans people can be sexist towards ourselves and others, but we are not any more or less sexist than non-trans people. It is not inherently sexist to be trans.

Similarly and unfortunately, trans communities are just as racist, classist, etc. as the rest of the world, but not more so. And these dynamics play out in particular ways among transpeople. Just like some people will tell you all gay people are white, some people believe that all trans people are white, and that being trans is just a privilege of white people. Of course it is easier to be trans (or anything actually) if you are white and have money, but most gender-variant and trans people are working-class and poor people of color, because most people in the world are poor and working-class people of color. Being trans is not inherently racist or classist.

Age

Don’t be surprised if you or others radically misread a transperson’s age. It may be amazing to you, but we are used to it, and probably over it. A lot of trans people on the FTM spectrum look much younger than they are, especially if they are not on hormones, are on a low dose of hormones, or are just starting hormones. Because of this, we may experience some of the effects of adultism, such as not being taken seriously, getting carded all the time, and being condescended to. Some people on the MtF spectrum (who are in one the categories of
hormone use above) may look older to you than they are, and experience the effects of sexism, like being treated as less important because they aren't seen as young and pretty.

**Fascinating trans movies/current events/TV shows/etc. etc…**

It is really important for people to educate themselves about different experiences of oppression, however, someone who has had to deal with that oppression all the time may not want to hear about it, or process how hard it was for you, as someone not directly affected by it. For example, when the movie “Boys Don’t Cry” came out, many many people every day took it upon themselves to try and discuss it with me, ask me if I’ve seen it, explain how tragic it was and how hard it was for them to watch as a non-trans person. We have to deal with transphobia all the time and so we don’t always want to talk about it. Check yourself before you bring up the ten latest, most horrifying transphobic things you heard yesterday - your trans friend may actually not want to re-experience them with you. If you want to discuss a movie, book, current event or experience that relates to trans issues, bring it up with another non-trans person. If a trans person wants to discuss it with you, they’ll bring it up.

**“Extra letter” Syndrome**

Gay and lesbian organizations all over the country have added a token ‘T’ to their names, without doing anything to include trans people or issues in their organizations. Although queer issues and trans struggles are linked (don’t forget who rioted at Stonewall), they are very different. For example, access to transition-related medical care (such as hormones and surgery), and issues of legal identification (such as changing our names and ‘sex’) are huge struggles faced by transpeople, but are non-issues for gay and lesbian people. As mentioned above, being “out” which is desirable in many GLBQ spaces (especially white, middle-class ones), is not a goal of many transpeople. Issues around sexual orientation are fundamentally different than the those of gender, so don’t assume you are serving us at all by just adding a “T” on the end of your acronym.

Recognize your own gender uniqueness and how transphobia affects you, but don’t speak for trans people. Also recognize that within trans communities, not only is each individual’s experience different, but each group of individuals’ experience is different from other groups. Just as you probably wouldn’t (or shouldn’t) ask a gay man to explain lesbian issues, you shouldn’t lump all trans people together, because we all have unique experiences and perspectives. For example, African-American transsexual issues are different from disabled genderqueer issues, which are different from drag king issues, and so on. Also, most indigenous cultures have non-binary gender systems, and many of us identify with our ethnically-specific gender identities (such as two-spirit, hijra, timtum, fa’afafine, etc.) that may overlap with, but are distinct from being ‘trans.’
GOOD THINGS!

There are so many positive things you can do to be ally to trans people, even if you do not have that much experience with trans communities.

Start with being honest about how much you know, or don’t know. It is refreshingly wonderful to hear someone say: “Actually, I don’t know anything about trans people. I want to support you and respect you, so please forgive my ignorance. I’m going to start educating myself.” Almost all of us started out ignorant of trans issues – even trans people! The important thing is to pro-actively learn more once you become aware.

Educate yourself and take action!

- Look at books, websites, films.
- Talk to other non-trans people who know more than you do.
- Start an unlearning transphobia group with other non-trans friends.
- Help write a non-discrimination policy for your school or workplace that protects gender identity and expression.
- Pay some trans folks to do an educational presentation for your group or organization.
- Especially if you work in a school, faith-based organization, governmental agency, or a social justice, social services or healthcare organization, try to integrate trans-inclusive policies and services.
- Work to create bathrooms that are accessible for all genders (for example, single-stall gender-neutral bathrooms)
- Think critically about your own gender and your participation in the binary gender system.
- Reflect on how you can be a better ally to trans people.

Once you have educated yourself, educate other non-trans people about gender issues. This is so needed and appreciated! There have been so many times when people said offensive things to me when I wished I had a non-trans ally to refer them to. Trans people shouldn’t have to do all the work. Besides, even though there are way more of us than you think, there aren’t enough of us to educate all the hordes and hordes of non-trans people in the world. Also, it’s a lot harder for us to do this work, because we are more vulnerable. Helping someone unlearn transphobia usually involves hearing and sorting through a lot of hurtful crud while people sort out their feelings about gender.

Interrupt transphobic behavior. This is also usually easier for a non-trans person to do, because they are not making themselves as personally vulnerable or a target for retaliation.
For example, correcting other people when they refer to someone by the wrong pronoun is very important. When introducing people, it is good etiquette to clue them in beforehand about the language preferred by any trans people who are present. By this I don’t mean outing any trans people who would prefer not to be out, but letting people know how to refer to anyone who might not ‘pass.’ Simply saying things like, “I’m a lady, he’s a guy,” or “that’s none of your business,” or “actually, his voice/body/manner is just great the way it is, and I don’t want to hear another comment about it,” can save the day.

Above all, talk to your trans friends, listen and educate yourself. If you are not sure how to best support someone, ask them. If you are not ready to support someone in the way that they need, don’t pretend that you are, just figure out what you need to do to get there. Starting to be an ally doesn’t require you to be an expert, just be honest with yourself and take some risks.

Remember:

gender is a universe and we are all stars.

Transphobia limits and oppresses all of us.

By becoming an ally, you’ll not only have the satisfaction of doing the right thing, you’ll get to experience your true starry brilliance.
Making Your Jewish Community Trans-Friendly
by Rabbi Elliot Kukla and Reuben Zellman, 2007

“And God created the human being in God’s own image...”
— Genesis 1:27

What Does “Transgender” Mean?

“Transgender” and “trans” are broad terms. They can include anyone who knows themselves to be a gender that is different than the gender they were assigned at birth. For example, a person may have been raised as a boy, but now see herself as completely female.

Other trans people may have an alternate gender identity that is neither male nor female, and for some people their gender identity may vary at different points in their lives. Some transgender people modify their bodies through medical means, and some do not.

What’s at Stake?

Transphobia, the fear of gender variance in society, impacts all parts of life. Children who do not conform to conventional gender expectations often experience physical, verbal, and sexual abuse at home and at school. As a result, transgender youth are much more likely to drop out of school, be disowned by their families, or commit suicide. Transgender adults face discrimination in employment, healthcare, and social services.

Unfortunately, the Jewish community is equally impacted by transphobia. As a result, many trans and gender-nonconforming individuals feel unwelcome in synagogues and other Jewish institutions, and cannot access spiritual care, social support, and Jewish community life.

How to Make Your Jewish Community More Trans-Friendly

Synagogues and other Jewish organizations are making changes and developing programming to educate members about transgender issues. The following are some examples of steps institutions have taken to become more inclusive and welcoming. As you implement changes, make sure to work with and support the leadership of transgender people themselves whenever possible.
EDUCATION

- Invite the whole community to a panel discussion, workshop, or other event that will offer information and open up dialogue about transgender issues.

- Offer an adult education class or sermon about gender diversity in Jewish texts or transgender issues in general.

- Advertise, host, or co-sponsor other organizations’ transgender-related programs.

- Assess what messages are conveyed in your religious school or children’s programs about gender and gender roles. Make sure there is support for trans and gender-nonconforming children and parents.

FACILITIES
Create a non-gender-specific restroom that is available to everyone. If you already have a single-stall restroom in your building, this can be easily accomplished by covering the “Men” or “Women” sign with an “All-Gender Restroom” sign. This applies to temporary, shared or rental facilities also.

In buildings where a single-stall restroom does not already exist, it may be more complicated to create restroom options that will make all members of your community feel comfortable. However, doing this work sends a very important message about the accessibility of your community. Many transgender people decide where they will go based upon whether there is a trans-friendly restroom or not.

LANGUAGE
Let people know that you are trans-inclusive by using welcoming language. This is very important. In newsletters, event announcements, sermons etc., instead of saying “this event welcomes men and women,” try “all genders welcome”; rather than talking about “both men and women,” try “people of all genders.” Saying that your community welcomes “everyone” is not enough. Research shows that transgender, as well as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, often assume that the word “everyone” does not include them.

OUTREACH
Create an outreach plan that includes the changes your community is making. Remember that the world at large is not very welcoming to transgender people. Therefore, trans people often assume that they are not welcome or included in your community, unless it is stated
otherwise. Publicize the trans-inclusive steps that your community has taken, as well as the
programs that you are planning. This lets trans people know that your community cares about
being an affirming place for them.

POLICY
Include “gender identity” and “gender expression” in your organization’s non-discrimination
and anti-harassment policy.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ACTION
Include transgender and gender diversity issues as part of your community’s social action
work. Support transgender community services and advocacy organizations.

RITUAL
• Be prepared to incorporate or develop new rituals or adapt existing ones in order to be
  trans-inclusive. How comfortable might a trans person be marking a wedding, b’nei
  mitzvah, conversion, loss, or other life-cycle event in your congregation? How open could
  they be about their identity from the bimah? Transgender people often experience unique
  life-cycle events, such as moments of gender transition or a name change. Some wish to
  mark these events in a Jewish way, either publicly or privately.

• Listen carefully to the needs that transgender people express, and be especially sensitive
  around vulnerable experiences such as the mikveh or illness. Be open to change and try
  to accommodate those needs to the greatest possible extent, even if it’s not the way things
  are “usually” done.

• If your synagogue has a mechitza (divider between men’s and women’s seating), support
  transgender people in praying where they feel comfortable.

• Adapt liturgy so that it is more inclusive of all genders. Include non-gendered and/or
  multi-gendered options for people and for God in your prayerbook.

• Observe the National Transgender Day of Remembrance (November 20th). This can be
  as simple as adding a memorial reading in your Shabbat service. For more information
  on this day visit: www.gender.org/remember.
MORE INFORMATION & RESOURCES

- **Jewish Mosaic: The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity** hosts TransTexts, an online guide to transgender issues in Jewish sacred texts. They also maintain a growing archive of trans-related documents, essays, and Torah commentaries through their LGBT Resource Library and Torah Queeries project. You can also find a guide to Transgender Etiquette/Support 101 on their website: [www.jewishmosaic.org](http://www.jewishmosaic.org).

- **The Sylvia Rivera Law Project** offers educational and training materials as well as information on the social and legal impacts of transphobia. [www.srlp.org](http://www.srlp.org).

- People who are intersex face issues that are related to those faced by trans people, but are not the same. The archived website of the former **Intersex Society of North America**, [www.isna.org](http://www.isna.org), offers information and resources on intersexuality. **The Accord Alliance** also offers related information and links to support groups: [www.accordalliance.org](http://www.accordalliance.org).

- **The National Center for Transgender Equality** is dedicated to advancing the equality of transgender people through advocacy, collaboration and empowerment. Their website includes 52 things you can do to support transgender equality: [www.nctequality.org](http://www.nctequality.org).

- The Children’s National Medical Center in Washington, DC, hosts the **Children’s Gender and Sexuality Advocacy and Education Program**. This program provides outreach to families and education to professionals in order to support and affirm children who do not fit society’s definition of idealized masculinity/femininity or sexual orientation. [www.dccchildrens.com/gendervariance](http://www.dccchildrens.com/gendervariance).

- For basic definitions of many terms associated with trans identity, as well as community information, and tips for friends and allies, visit Trans@MIT: [http://web.mit.edu/trans](http://web.mit.edu/trans). We also recommend Trans Etiquette/Respect/Support 101, available at [www.transtorah.org/resources.html](http://www.transtorah.org/resources.html).