

## Dr. Ladin's Transformative Journey

By Olivia Wiznitzer

*Associated Press standards have been followed in referring to people by their gender of choice.*

Amidst a furor of controversy and sensationalistic outside press coverage, Dr. Joy Ladin, formerly Jay, an Associate Professor of English and the Director of the Writing Center at Stern College for Women, was welcomed back to Yeshiva University.

The reason she was welcomed back in such a fashion was because she physically no longer represented as a male, in the way that Dr. Jay Ladin once had, but rather took the form of a female.

Despite foreseeable difficulties due to her physical appearance, Dr. Ladin explains that she returned to Yeshiva University for two reasons. While some in the Orthodox community have said Ladin should go elsewhere to teach, Ladin points out that, practically speaking, “There are not many jobs for English professors, and the fewest jobs are available to people who teach poetry.” On the other hand, Ladin acknowledges that, “I love teaching here. As a scholar, a Jew, and a human being, this place has challenged me, and has just been great.”

At the same time, she is very aware of the difficulties she faces.

In a powerful testimony to the depth of her feeling for Judaism, Ladin explains that, “If I didn’t know anything else about God, I knew this: God could be glimpsed in whatever is true.” Aware of the fact that the Torah prohibits cross-dressing, and that halakha has developed along these lines, forbidding sterilization or body mutilation, she states, “It’s true; it’s the hard thing about my tradition. It’s true.”

At the same time, caustic statements “are disappointing to me,” explains Ladin, “because I feel devotion to Torah should bring out the best of us. The moment we lose awareness that we are talking to other human beings, we have fallen short. I say we because I do this, too, and do *teshuva* [repentance] on my perpetration of it.”

Beyond religious considerations, Ladin notes that her presence is a challenge to many, who see her as someone alternatively inspirational or threatening, due to the fact that she has chosen to live in a way that she feels expresses her true self. Ladin explains that there are people who are angry with her because they are sacrificing their true selves to stability, and feel that she ought to do the same. At the same time, there are people who view her journey as inspirational, and



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perhaps wish they had her strength of will. “Transsexuality is a lightning rod for feelings,” she states.

In an ideal Orthodox Jewish world, Ladin believes that, “We would get to the point where people recognize I hear and respect their positions on halakha.” At the same time, she believes her decision was the only one possible. “I was going to die if I didn’t do this; what’s going on here is a matter of life and death, and I think halakha is clear on that. Nobody can truly understand our experience unless they listen or talk with a transsexual. I don’t think many people can do that while they think this is a major threat against Judaism. I would like people to see that I am listening, also, respecting, also.”

While not a traditionally observant Jew herself, Ladin identifies with Arthur Green, a rabbi, scholar, author and the Dean of Hebrew College’s Rabbinical School. “I haven’t found an organized version of Judaism that is completely comfortable, but I haven’t met any versions of Judaism that I feel completely estranged from,” Ladin notes. “You guys [students at Stern College] have taught me that.” Not having been familiar with Orthodoxy before, Ladin is impressed and proud to teach at a place where “religion can produce such a steady stream of great young women.”

Dr. Nora Nachumi, Associate Professor and Acting Chair of the English Department, states that, “Joy is a respected member of our Department and has our full support.” She believes that the question raised by Ladin’s presence on campus is: can religious observance and tolerance for diversity coexist in the same room?

Ladin has a less ambitious goal. She merely wishes to teach, while living as her authentic self. This, she believes, is her way of fulfilling the mandate of *tikkun olam* [fixing the world] and helping to create a more beautiful universe.



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