

Making Your Community More Transgender-Friendly:

Guidelines for Individuals and Congregations

In recent years transgender people have begun to take a more visible place in the LGBT and wider communities. Many non-trans people want to be respectful of transgender community members and want their community to be trans-friendly and welcoming, but they don't necessarily know how to do that or where to begin. This page is intended to answer some common questions and to provide some basic ways to make your synagogue more trans-friendly. There is a lot more information out there and many creative ideas that have yet to be invented.

Just like other Jews, transgender Jews want to participate in community as their whole, true selves. Every shul has transgender members. It is up to each community to decide how welcoming it will be and whether transgender people will find there a safe and affirming place to study, grow, celebrate and contribute.

What Every Person Can Do

When interacting with transgender people in any setting, the most important thing to remember is to respect each person and their identity and experience. The important thing is how they feel inside, not how they look outside--just as we all hope that people will treat us according to who we are and not how we appear.

Asking questions

Transgender people understand that gender can be complicated and confusing and that most people do not know very much about these issues. The important thing is that people be respectful, and it is generally appreciated when people want to learn. There are ways to ask questions that are respectful and other ways that are not.

The first question to ask about someone else's gender is: "**Do I really need to know?**" There are many situations in which it is really not important what a person's gender status or situation is. 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.

There may be times in which you decide that you do need to know or understand something about someone else's gender. Most people are welcoming of respectful and appropriate questions. This is often better than making assumptions that may not be true. If the person doesn't want to answer, then they will choose not to.

What is a respectful question?

The most important guideline is a version of Hillel's rule: If you yourself would not wish to be asked a given question, it is probably not respectful to ask it of someone else.

- **Instead of asking "What are you?" or "Are you a man or a woman?", try:** "What is the respectful pronoun to use for you?" or "I'm interested in hearing about your gender

identity if you are comfortable telling me" or "Is there anything I/we/the community can do to make this a more comfortable place?"

- **Don't ask about anyone's body, genitals, medical procedures, or medical history.** If they want to share that information, they will. If you are concerned about someone's health, it is fine to ask, "How is your health?" as you would for any other community member.

Other Do's and Don'ts

- **Don't unnecessarily refer to a person's previous gender status or a previous name.** If this information is not known publicly, revealing it could put the person at risk of harm. Regardless of how open a person is about being transgender, referring to their previous status usually makes that person uncomfortable. This can be analogized to the situation of a person who has converted to Judaism. They may choose to refer to their previous religion or identity, but others do not bring it up.
- **Don't insist that someone must be either a man or a woman.** Some people identify themselves as neither gender, as both genders, or as a third gender. This may seem confusing, but this is a legitimate choice. Some people are in a process of discovering their identity or deciding how they wish to live. People may be in various stages of a gender transition. If you need clarification on which pronoun to use, ask.
- **Don't say things like:** "But you look like a woman!" or "But I've always known you as a man" or "But you made such a good/attractive woman." Comments like these are disrespectful and make people feel badly.
- **Don't be afraid to say,** "I don't understand, but I want to be respectful of you." Being a good ally to transgender people does not mean that you never get confused or make mistakes. It means that you are doing everything in your power to learn and to act in a respectful way, always--even when you don't understand.
- **Do take other people's identities seriously, even though it may not conform to your own ideas about gender or sex.** Remember to treat other people's identities and choices with the respect that you would want for yourself.
- **Do respect a person's choice of name/gender/pronoun.** If a person expresses that they prefer a certain name or pronoun, take care to use only the name/gender/pronoun that they prefer, and strongly encourage others in the community to do the same. This can take time to get used to, and most people do make mistakes--don't worry. The person is almost certainly used to mistakes. The important thing is that that person knows that you respect their preference, and are trying.
- **Do remember that not all transgender people are the same.** Like everyone else, different transgender people have different identities, experiences, needs, and interests.
- **Do act as an ally** with others in the congregation. If you notice non-inclusive language, suggest to the appropriate person that it be corrected. If you know that someone prefers a certain pronoun, it is appropriate to gently inform or remind someone else who is not using that correct pronoun.
- **Do remember that you may be interacting with a transgender person** and not know it.

- **Do seek out information on your own.** Transgender community members will be very appreciative of your efforts to learn about the experience of transgender people.

What the Synagogue Can Do

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 transgender experiences. The following are examples of some steps that synagogues have taken to become more educated and welcoming.

Language

Language is very important. People pick up on small cues. The following changes may seem minor, but they are among the most important ways to indicate that a community is making an effort to be trans-friendly. It often makes the difference in whether a transgender person will approach a community and whether they will choose to stay.

- On flyers, in newsletters, event announcements, etc.: Instead of writing "men and women welcome" or "for both men and women," try "all genders welcome" or "for all genders."
- In articles, sermons, essays etc.: Rather than "both genders" or "men and women," refer to "all genders" or "people of any gender."
- If events, groups or programs (event, social group, chavurah, etc.) are advertised or indicated as "gay and lesbian," consider whether it really is only for gay and lesbian people or whether a transgender (or bisexual person, for that matter) would be welcomed. If the latter is true, change the language.

Facilities

If possible, it is very important to have a non-gender-specific restroom. Again, this may seem like a minor matter. But for many people who have a “non-traditional” gender presentation, using public restrooms can be a particularly frightening and unpleasant experience. They are often much more inclined to go to places that have a non-gender-specific facility. (Often these are single-person restrooms.)

- 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

Ritual has the potential to be powerfully affirming. It also has the potential to be marginalizing or humiliating at important life moments.

- 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?

- Specific rituals: 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.
- Rethinking liturgy: Consider how your synagogue's liturgy appears to a transgender person. Are there non-gendered options for human beings and for G-d? Are there readings or prayers that speak to major life transitions? Could an option be included that specifically reflects a transgender experience?
- If Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Pride Month is observed in your congregation, make sure that the “transgender” part is included in a substantial way. If you do not currently acknowledge the LGBT community specifically in the ritual life of your congregation, consider making that change.
- Consider observing the national Transgender Day of Remembrance in your congregation. Commemorations are held annually on November 20th. Observing this at services on the preceding Shabbat is an excellent opportunity to reach out to transgender people and to educate and involve the whole congregation in a meaningful way. For more information: www.gender.org/remember

Education

- Invite the whole community to a panel discussion, workshop or other event that will open up dialogue. This gives willing transgender members or guests an opportunity to talk about their experience, and gives others an opportunity to ask questions and generate ideas in a safe and understanding environment.
- Offer an adult education class 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.
- Include transgender community concerns in a sermon.
- Consider what messages are conveyed in your religious school or children's programs about gender and gender roles. What do the words and images you use—in books, posters, music—teach about how different genders are ‘supposed to be’? How are children taught about Jewish ways of respecting and welcoming many different kinds of human beings? Could transgender people be included?
- Put a column or information about transgender issues in your newsletter or other publication.

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 must assume that they are not welcome or included- unless it is stated otherwise.

More and more resources are being developed to help congregations and other Jewish organizations become more transgender-friendly. Transgender people have been made invisible in Jewish communities for a long time; today many people are working to change that, and every congregation can choose to be a part of this change and to become models for others. Contact one of the organizations listed in this edition of *Kulanu*, or reach out to your local lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender community center. Support and resources are there to help. If you want to become more welcoming to transgender Jews, you can.

Reuben Zellman, 2004