

Transsexuals In the Frum Community Speak Out

By Olivia Wiznitzer

Names have been changed to protect identities. Associated Press standards have been followed in referring to people by their gender of choice.

It begins with “The Dina List.”

Beth Orens, creator of “The Dina List,” explains that she started the Dina List, “basically, because it didn’t already exist. I would have preferred for resources like that to be available for me to just join, but it didn’t work out that way.” The Dina List is a resource for transsexuals who are *frum* [observant] Jews or respectful of *frumkeit* [Orthodox Judaism], a place to meet, interact and speak to other Jewish transsexuals online.

Orens entitled her online listserv “The Dina List” because of the idea noted in Berakhot 60a, where Rav states that the matriarch Leah “passed judgment on herself, saying, ‘Twelve tribes are destined to come from Jacob. Six have come from me and four from my handmaids, making ten. If this child will be a male, my sister Rachel will not be equal to one of the handmaids.’ Therefore the child was turned into a girl, as it says, ‘And she called her name Dina.’” This change of the fetus from a male to a female aptly depicts the struggle and desire of Jewish transsexuals.

Currently, The Dina List hosts about 21 members. “Some are on the verge of transitioning, some are pre-op, some are post-op, some are male-to-female and some are female-to-male,” explains Orens. They span the spectrum of Orthodox affiliation, including those who were or continue to be *Chareidi*, Modern Orthodox or self-titled freelance Jews. They also span geographic locales, with some members living in the United States, others in Israel, and still others scattered throughout Europe. While all members share the unique experience of being a transsexual within the Jewish community, they have very different points of view and stances about the challenges presented by this.

The Observer polled members of The Dina List about their experiences with transsexuality and transitioning in the Orthodox Jewish community. The majority of those who responded concur that they first felt that they were in truth members of the opposite sex at a very young age, generally somewhere between three and eight. While many of them did not confide in their parents, indications that they were actually members of the opposite sex were often present.

Dana, whose birth sex is male, recalls an incident at age 11 when “a well-meaning friend told me with a very grave look on his face that he didn’t mean to insult me, but he wanted to advise me that I walked like a girl. I was thrilled.” Similarly Hayley, whose birth sex is also male,



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explained that she did not tell anyone of how she felt because, “I lived with my father who was very strict and extremely religious.” However, “there were indications present to family members and I was always ‘corrected’ in how I stand and walk,” she said.

In contrast, Jonah, born female, states that he remembers “incidents in preschool where I insisted that I was a boy, and in kindergarten I remember asking Hashem to please make me a girl on the inside or a boy on the outside, so I could match.”

At the same time, Orens cautions that it isn’t only “girlie boys who transition MtF [male to female] or tomboys who transition FtM [female to male.]”

The point on which every Dina List member who responded agrees is that being transsexual is not a choice.

Nicole, born male, cites the level of pain one undergoes to transition as proof. While “it’s true that we [members of the Dina List] are quite diverse in our personalities, I think there is a common chord that resonates with all of our experiences,” she states. This is “the experience of being trans, of knowing it profoundly and deeply, and understanding the intensity and pain of the dysphoria.” Many members on the list went through divorces, ridicule, shame, blame and hurt in order to transition, or are no longer permitted to be in contact with their children. Nicole believes that no one would willingly choose to undergo this.

When asked how she would describe what it means to be a transsexual, if it is not a choice, Hayley cites scientific theory. “This is a condition that starts prior to birth. In the womb, a baby brain is given a wash of hormones that locks in the gender’s personality. If the hormone wash is not sufficient, the baby will not accept that personality, or if there are hormones present of the opposite genetic gender, then it will consequently affect the personality as well. This will manifest itself in childhood and many aspects of childhood that play out in certain ways will further affect the condition, drawing it out. As this happens prior to birth and is made permanent by aspects of childhood, this is not changeable,” she states.

Dana answers with her unfailing, gutsy humor: “Being Jewish, I’ll answer a question with a question: Would anyone CHOOSE this? Abe Lincoln was accused, in his debate with Frederick Douglass, of having been two-faced. Lincoln replied: ‘If I had two faces, why would I be wearing this one?’”

Beth also boasts a finely developed, wry sense of humor. “Being transsexual isn’t a choice,” she asserts. “Transitioning is. Granted, it’s not a choice like, ‘Hmm, shall I have chocolate or vanilla today? It’s more like, ‘Hmm...here I am, falling off a tall building. Shall I grab a ledge and save myself, or become a street pancake?’ It’s a choice, but it’s kind of a no-brainer at a certain point.”



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Tziona, born male, echoes those sentiments, stating that “the dysphoria of having a gender identity/ body mismatch is not a choice, but deciding to do something about it is; whether that decision is to seek help or go the other way and commit suicide, it’s still a choice.” She explains the choice to transition as “an attempt to resolve dissonance to consonance. For people who have never known inner harmony, the discord can eventually reverberate to such a cacophony it becomes unbearable,” she explains.

When members of the list were asked how they would have liked the Jewish community to have reacted to their new status as transsexuals who had transitioned, The Observer received a variety of answers.

Dr. Jillian Weiss, Associate Professor of Law at Ramapo College, born male, states that she would “like the community to react to my new status with compassion and *rachmanus* [mercy], and to understand that this is not an *aveira* [sin.]”

“That’s a very tough call,” answers Dana. “Orthodoxy has always survived by some measure of exclusivity. The concept of a completely inclusive frum community is almost oxymoronic. In an ideal, fantasy world, it would have been great if the frum world accepted difference and encouraged people to express themselves, and celebrated diversity. If the Jewish community had helped those who were different to stay inside the community, assured that there’d be a place for them, it might be stronger today. But that’s not the common wisdom. The needs of the *tzibbur* [community] outweigh the needs of the individual. So, if the community at large was uncomfortable, the transsexual person is/ was cast aside.”

Hayley would like to “get the word out to leaders that this is not something sexual in nature; rather, it’s a product of our natal development as well as influences of our upbringing. Both together had a hand in it and as Hashem made us this way, do not turn away from us, throw us out, etc.” When asked whether she believes it is permissible to take hormones or undergo SRS [Sex Reassignment Surgery], alternatively called GRS [Gender Reassignment Surgery], per halakha, Hayley answers that she doesn’t know and cannot let herself worry about that. “For my own wellbeing I must follow my heart and Hashem will judge me in *shamayim* [heaven],” she asserts.

Beth explains that she believes the “problem in the frum community is that most of the rejection is not based on halakha. The negativity is so much more than halakha merits that it’s clearly not coming from the halakha. The way people react is almost as if they use the halakha as a justification for their prejudices.”

Perhaps most inspiring is the deep attachment that many of these Jews harbor toward the frum community.



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Beth, who was raised Conservative, became frum in college for intellectual reasons. After transitioning, she went off the *derech* [path], but even when she wasn't observant, keeping Shabbos or keeping kosher, she was ideologically frum. Later on, in a tremendous show of courage, she became observant once more. "It's hard to live a life doing what you think is wrong," she says softly. "It's also hard living in a society [the Orthodox community] where I can't be accepted, but I think it's harder to be untrue to yourself than it is to be rejected by society."

At the same time, Beth resists easy answers or resorting to emotional blackmail. "The easy thing to do would be to go and find rationalizations," she states, such as the idea of "*v'chai bahem*" [and he should live through them], referring to the idea that one is supposed to live Judaism, not die through it. "If what I did was wrong, and maybe it was, I hope that I've done enough good things that when *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* [The Holy One, Blessed Be He] does the balance, that will make up for it," she says.

When speaking of her relationship to the frum community, Beth notes that "in some ways I would say that if somebody is gay or trans and is determined to be frum and do what Hashem says, even if you come along and say they don't have halakhic justification, still, look at the other things that they do- there's a degree of *mesiras nefesh* [self-sacrifice] involved in staying frum when there's so much social pressure against you. Sometimes I wonder if they [people who criticize or ostracize Jewish transsexuals] would be able to stay frum if they went through the same things we have."

Simon, born female, agrees. "I really miss, need, suffer from not having a Jewish community where I belong, feel at home and am accepted," he states.



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