

## A Guide for LGBTQ Inclusion for Synagogues

*Below you will find several suggestions for how to make your synagogue a more inclusive, welcoming, and safe environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals and families. These suggestions are organized around the frame of exploring three areas of your synagogue—**Culture, Policy, and Programming**. Under these headings you will find more specific aspects and action to help you achieve your goal. This list is neither exhaustive, nor does it apply to every synagogue community.*

### CULTURE

#### **What is the culture of your synagogue?**

The first step towards creating a fully inclusive culture and environment is a commitment to a vision and the values of equality and respect for all people—and cultivating the language necessary to communicate those values and put them into action. Culture is also influenced by policy, which will be discussed in a later section.

#### **Make inclusion of LGBTQ members a core value of your synagogue.**

Change comes from many directions including the grass roots, the grass tops and the senior leadership. As you spread the value of LGBTQ inclusion from wherever you stand, developing a commitment from the senior leadership of the synagogue and buy in on the part of staff, lay leaders and members is essential in order to enshrine this belief as a core value of your community. It is also crucial that this value be discussed openly and expressed explicitly. Even in communities where there seems to be agreement that inclusion of LGBTQ Jews is essential, it is still important to state this explicitly. You may also find that not everyone is ready for this change and that is also part of the process. Long-term dialogue and on-going communication work to create buy-in and each synagogue community will progress at its own rate.

Start with the Jewish values that are the basis for your work. Do these values that you have already committed to, also support LGBTQ inclusion? Then, ask what additional Jewish values could be incorporated to strengthen your synagogue's commitment to inclusion. See Keshet's poster of [Seven Jewish Values for Inclusive Community](#) for some suggestions.

#### **How will people know that your synagogue places value on LGBTQ inclusion?**

If you have already established the values that support LGBTQ inclusion, make sure that they are prominently displayed in offices and classrooms, in the hallways, on your website, and in print materials. If you are starting the process of re-examining your values, open up public and communal discussions about LGBTQ inclusion at the beginning of the year or in specific forums

to review the vision and values of your community. By publicly stating this as a core value, potential and current LGBTQ congregants and families will know that their synagogue values equality and that they will be protected against discrimination. Saying “we welcome everyone” is not enough.

**Educate yourself and others on LGBTQ terms.**

Often, one of the greatest challenges for non-LGBTQ people in talking about LGBTQ issues is uncertainty regarding language and vocabulary. As many terms are new, or are used differently by different groups and in different contexts, people are sometimes uncertain and embarrassed to enter a conversation for fear of being wrong, looking ignorant, or of inadvertently hurting someone’s feelings. Educating yourself, being respectful, and taking responsibility if you make a mistake goes a long way to making LGBTQ people feel welcomed and safe.

For a list of LGBTQ terminology, visit [Keshet’s website](#).

**Do not assume the sexual orientation or gender identity of your members.**

When we make incorrect assumptions about the sexuality or gender identity of community members, we risk rendering gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals invisible, and may cause deep pain. When we fail to see our members as their full selves, we risk alienating them from our community and discouraging them from participating fully, or at all. For example, when talking to a member about dating, don’t automatically assume that they are interested in the opposite sex.

**Ensure your facilities are inclusive.**

Everyday actions like using the bathroom are complicated and often dangerous for transgender and gender non-conforming people because our world often only offers two options: “male” and “female.” Consider whether all of your facility’s restrooms must be gender-specific or whether one could be made available to everyone. Depending on the existing facility, this need not be complicated; covering the “men” or “women” sign with “all-gender restroom” sign could be sufficient. Remember to do this for temporary, shared, or rental facilities also.

This step towards inclusion might also mean making renovations so that every stall has privacy. If an all gender bathroom is not possible or appropriate for a given setting, think creatively for how a transgender or gender non-conforming member can have a safe bathroom space such as access to a staff bathroom.

Find explanatory text that Keshet uses to accompany all-gender restroom signs [here](#).

**Create a safe environment and culture by prohibiting abusive and homophobic language.**

The positive and non-homophobic or transphobic language used by synagogue leaders is an important model for members of how to treat each other with respect and greatly influences synagogue culture. One of the most important things a synagogue can do to ensure that LGBTQ members feel safe and welcome in your synagogue community is to make sure that harassing language is strictly and proactively banned. Words like “faggot” and “dyke,” and phrases like “that’s so gay” both deeply offend and also create an environment that is not only uncomfortable, but unsafe for LGBTQ members. Creating a “[Safe Zone](#)” program—displaying posters, stickers and other literature encouraging acceptance—is a great way to communicate that your synagogue is a safe environment for all.

However, more than any program or sticker, it is essential to be proactive. When you overhear a member using homophobic or abusive language, it is important that this is pointed out, discussed, and stopped. Incidents like these negatively affect the recipient, the one who perpetrates, and the bystander who witnesses it. Depending on the setting and the situation, you may offer a short or a more involved intervention. If you are only able to provide a limited intervention for whatever reason, you can always revisit the issue after consultation with trusted colleagues. Training on how to do this is vital so that they feel comfortable and equipped to make it happen.

Find [ideas](#) on how to respond to congregants who say “that’s so gay” and print your own [Safe Zone stickers](#) at the Keshet website.

**Share your culture and let the world know about your commitment to LGBTQ inclusion.**

Even if you think it is obvious, explicitly state in marketing materials, on your website and other communications that your synagogue is welcoming of LGBTQ congregants and families. For many, this is the first introduction to who you are and it will go a long way in letting potential congregants know that the synagogue is a safe space for them, and letting all other constituents know the values of your institution. Keshet has many statements of [LGBTQ inclusion and welcoming](#) to share with you.

**Inclusion is a journey, not a destination.**

Every synagogue is different, and no one knows your synagogue better than you. No matter how many trainings you hold, safe space signs you put up, or anti-bullying policies you put into place, the only true way to create a fully open and supportive community is to be committed to values of equality and respect all the time, every day. Have your staff check in regularly and discuss how your synagogue is meeting its goals and achieving its values. This time for reflection does not necessarily require special meetings, but can be incorporated into your regular staff

meetings and check-ins. Bring your congregants into the conversation, particularly teens. Brainstorm new ways to encourage greater equality and respect, address any issues and make it an ongoing conversation in your community. A synagogue that cares deeply about the safety and happiness of their LGBTQ congregants will undoubtedly be a wonderful place for them to belong.

### **Make sure your institution is in Keshet's Equality Guide.**

Keshet has a searchable [Equality Guide](#), an online guide for finding LGBTQ inclusive clergy and institutions. Be sure to register your synagogue as soon as possible. Clergy is listed separately from institutions.

## **POLICY**

Policies that explicitly include LGBTQ members, staff, and clergy are the foundation of LGBTQ inclusion in your synagogue. Inclusive Human Resources policies, documents, and guidelines are a way of demonstrating a commitment to LGBTQ inclusion from the highest levels of organizational leadership. They are also crucial to creating environments for worshiping, learning, and working that are safe for all participants.

### **Create inclusive policies.**

Both current and potential LGBTQ members, as well as LGBTQ staff and clergy need to know that your synagogue values equality, and is committed to protecting them from discrimination and harassment. By mentioning this commitment in your existing policy documents or by creating new language, you will communicate a commitment to equal treatment for all.

The necessary documents include a comprehensive anti-bullying statement for any educational programs that include children and teens, inclusive anti-harassment Human Resources policies for faculty and staff, and a non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. These statements should be easily available on your website, printed in your parent and student handbook, and available upon request.

For [sample language](#) for different non-discrimination policies visit the Keshet website.

### **Ensure inclusive documents.**

Make sure your forms including admission, registration, and permission slips are inclusive of LGBTQ families and individuals. When crafting such forms, be sure that they are welcoming to a spouse or partner of any gender. Rather than listing "mother" and "father," write "parent/guardian 1" and "parent/guardian 2." Depending on the form, if it is not necessary, take out the question on gender. When you do actually need to know the gender of a member,

write “gender” and leave a blank space to be filled in. This allows members to fill-in how they want to be identified which may be outside of the two binary genders (male and female).

### **Create an LGBTQ or Diversity Task Force.**

Consider convening an LGBTQ or Diversity Task Force charged with strengthening your synagogue’s organizational policies and practices. This group can consist of leadership, staff, and parents. This will insure that your synagogue has the infrastructure and leadership to effectively respond to issues as they arise, and to proactively identify areas for improvement.

## **PROGRAMMING**

In order to achieve your goals, your values of equality and inclusivity must be imbedded in the everyday life of your synagogue, which is embodied in all ritual, education, and other programming in which your members participate. Here are a few examples of the many possible ways to engage with LGBTQ and Jewish topics.

### **Include LGBTQ issues on the *bima*.**

Whether during a “pride Shabbat” during June, the annual pride month, or at other distinct times, have the clergy or others speak from the *bima* about Jewish values of equality, inclusivity and safety for all LGBTQ individuals. This is an important way to teach about LGBTQ issues, encourage sensitivity regarding sexuality and gender expression and also publicly discuss your synagogue’s commitment to its LGBTQ members. Click [here](#) and enter the keyword “sermon” to see examples of sermons on LGBTQ themes.

### **Provide adult learning on LGBTQ topics.**

Our commitment to the inclusion of LGBTQ Jews is not just a secular value, but a Jewish value. When appropriate, integrate LGBTQ issues and topics into lectures and learning series in order to demonstrate how inclusivity is interwoven with our Judaism. In Jewish history, Holocaust studies, and on Israel, there are many ways to include Jewish LGBTQ sources and material. For classes on Bible, look at the prohibitions in Leviticus from a new lens using Jay Michaelson’s book, *God vs. Gay? The Religious Case for Equality*. Also, Judaism says much about positive sexuality, gender and how to treat all people with respect. When discussing Jewish ethics around love and sex, do not just refer to heterosexual dating and marriage. For certain denominations and in pluralistic settings, acknowledge and include a full spectrum of relationships and ways to experience human love.

When studying Torah, add an LGBTQ lens to your understand and examination of the text.

There are now many resources for this such as the book *Torah Queeries* which provides LGBTQ readings on each *parsha* and for holiday. The book came out of an online series but developed

all new submissions so now there are two unique sets of readings on each parsha from an LGBTQ perspective. The online *Torah Queeries* database can be found [here](#). You can also introduce or bring in LGBTQ scholars who interpret Torah from a LGBTQ perspective (Here is an example from [Dr. Joy Ladin](#)), or start a conversation about Keshet's [Seven Jewish Values for Inclusive Community](#) with your community. These are just a few examples of the many possible ways to teach about LGBTQ and Jewish topics.

### **Encourage LGBTQ participation, celebrations and ritual moments.**

It may go without saying that there is no difference between celebrating the life cycle moments of heterosexual members and families and a LGBTQ members and families. Share in the joy of same gender commitment and wedding ceremonies by encouraging couples to celebrate with an [\*aufruf\*](#) ceremony, host an *oneg* Shabbat in their honor, and/or include a mazel tov in your temple bulletin (click [here](#) for resources on LGBTQ marriage). Publicize and celebrate the anniversaries of all committed couples. Perform baby namings and *brit milah* ceremonies for the children of LGBTQ couples just as you would a heterosexual couple. Provide a space for members to say *kaddish* and mourn their LGBTQ family members, including their spouses and partners.

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 such as the one found [here](#).

Also, honors belong to the entire congregational membership. Make sure that LGBTQ community members are honored at services (i.e., opening the ark, reading a prayer or other passage, or lighting the Shabbat candles).

### **Include LGBTQ issues in your synagogue's social justice agenda.**

When deciding upon social justice issues to work on and fight for, include LGBTQ concerns related to employment rights and benefits, adoption, marriage, health issues, hatred and violence, etc. Encourage members to fight against homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity both within the synagogue and in the larger world, and include these struggles in your community's commitment to *tikkun olam*, healing our broken world.

### **Mark LGBTQ celebrations and days of mourning in your yearly calendar.**

Like the Jewish calendar, the LGBTQ calendar has moments of celebration and moments of memorial and mourning for those who have lost their lives due to homophobic or transphobic violence.

Join in on walking in [an LGBTQ Pride parade](#) most often celebrated every June. [National Coming Out Day](#), observed annually on October 11, is another opportunity for celebration and learning. November 20 is [Transgender Day of Remembrance](#), a day when we remember those transgender individuals who have lost their lives in violent attacks, and all those who have faced oppression due to transphobia. Additionally, on *Yom HaShoah*, Holocaust Memorial Day, your community can remember Jewish and non-Jewish LGBTQ victims alongside all other victims of the Holocaust.

## RESOURCES

You do not need to reinvent the wheel when introducing LGBTQ issues and ideas to your community. Full LGBTQ inclusion can be a complex process, but there is support for you on the internet and in professional development and training opportunities. Below are a more suggestions for specific resources that will help you implement your new action steps:

### **Provide training for your staff, lay leadership and community members.**

Once your synagogue has committed to the full inclusion of LGBTQ congregants and families, it is important to provide your community with the skills they need to put these goals into action. Through training, all stakeholders will have the opportunity to gain tools and resources, reflect on the needs of your population and learn more about how to create inclusive community. Contact [Daniel Bahner](#), Keshet's National Manager of Education and Training, and click [here](#) to find out more about Keshet trainings.

### **Make sure your synagogue library has current LGBTQ books and media.**

Often times when community members are questioning their sexuality or gender identification, they will turn to the internet for information and support. They may also look for books, movies, magazines and other materials in your library. Be sure to have updated and current LGBTQ resources, and have them readily available and prominently displayed. Librarians, educators, and other administrators should be made aware of these resources and be available to help LGBTQ members find and access them. Click [here](#) for a recently published article in *Judaica Librarianship* on essential LGBTQ books for Jewish libraries as well as these other lists of LGBTQ books and media found at [Keshet](#), the [Jewish Book Council](#), and [NFTY](#)

Keshet provides [many resources](#) which have been described throughout this document ( ) including [videos](#), [Torah Queeries](#), textual interpretation of Torah and Jewish holidays from an LGBTQ lens, "[Wrestling with God](#)," a collection of classical texts that deal with sexuality, gender and theology; and [Trans Texts](#) a collection of classical Jewish texts on gender in general, and non-conforming gender expressions in particular.

**The following are additional resources that will be helpful for your institution:**

- [Trans Torah](#), a website that seeks to help institutions like you become more trans- inclusive, and collects excellent resources, rituals, videos and text studies
- [The Institute for Judaism, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion](#), which has many useful articles and other resources
- The “[It Gets Better Project](#)”
- “[I am: Trans People Speak](#),” a collection of trans and ally voices from a range of personal experiences
- [Jewish Organization Equality Index](#), tools for Jewish institutions that want to be more inclusive of LGBTQ individuals
- [National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Institute for Welcoming Resources](#), resources for LGBTQ inclusion in many religions
- [Liturgy and Ritual resources for LGBTQ Jews](#)