



# transformative inclusion: a resource guide for transgender welcome in jewish congregations and organizations



**Jewish Roundtable**

of the Center for LGBTQ and Gender Studies in Religion



Center for  
**LGBTQ and Gender Studies**  
in Religion (CLGS)

# INTRODUCTION

Thank you for picking up this guide, it is an important step to learning more about transgender people—both the gifts that they bring to our society and the challenges they face. Gaining this knowledge is also critical to becoming more welcoming to those who are trans and gender non-conforming. It is important to acknowledge that there is an ongoing learning process. No matter how successful an individual, congregation, or organization is in welcoming trans people, there is always room to grow and extend the mitzvah of *hachnasat orachim*, hospitality to everyone.

Many people find themselves initially unsure about trans people, or have questions about trans identities. This is normal. But we have found that the more people know about trans people, the more accepting they become over time. Having the facts is really important.

Maybe you are using this guide because you have questions about transgender people, to help prepare your congregation or organization for trans people who have not yet arrived or have not come out, or perhaps you already have a number of trans people among your membership and in leadership roles. Regardless of how many trans people participate in your congregation or organization, your community can become more welcoming and a safer place for trans people.

Recently the United States has witnessed a political shift that focuses on trans people in discriminatory ways. We find that in the wake of the nationwide victory for marriage equality, other rights for LGBT people are suddenly being stripped away. Trans people are being scapegoated in this process, and the impact on the lives and spirits of trans and gender non-conforming people should not be underestimated. This is an important issue for all Jews and Jewish communities concerned with *tikkun olam*, social justice.

As a partner text to this guide, we recommend the CLGS publication *Transitioning to Inclusion: A Guide to Welcoming Transgender Children and Their Families to Your Community of Faith* by Kelsey Pacha, available for download at [www.clgs.org/transitioningyouthresource](http://www.clgs.org/transitioningyouthresource)

Human rights laws and other legislative measures aimed at protecting all people from discrimination are being overturned under the guise of “protecting” non-LGBT people from the imaginary threat of gender difference. Nowhere is this supposed threat more dramatically played out than in public restrooms. However, this “threat” is not taking place in real public facilities, but rather in the collective imagination of fear-mongering lawmakers. Whether yours is a state that is debating this harmful legislation or not, as Jews - members of an often scapegoated minority – scapegoating and fearmongering impacts all of us.

Trans inclusion in Jewish communities and organizations is part of our commitment to *tikkun olam*. As Jews and allies, we know the importance of standing together to protect those who are vulnerable and in need of support. We want to help you by providing information about

transgender people so that you become more fluent in the language of inclusion. We will aid you in creating an environment of welcome and support. As sexual and gender minorities face discrimination on new fronts, this guide will help you to support those who need your compassion and advocacy.

What is this booklet? It's a guide for creating inclusive spaces. It's likely that your journey to trans inclusion is not going to be perfect, especially not in the early stages. There might be moments that conversations are awkward and words may cause us to stumble. Discomfort and uncertainty are parts of the growing process. Our Sages teach, "*Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor*, – you are not obligated to complete the task; *v'lo ata ben horin l'hitbatel mimenu* – but neither are you free to ignore it." (Pirkei Avot)

We know that that your community or organization is in good faith, even if you find yourselves stumbling (rather than gliding) toward inclusion. Sometimes questions or comments that come across as insensitive are well intended, even if not well informed. We acknowledge that there is a learning process and want to provide you with tools that enhance your outreach as a community. We are hoping to empower individuals and communities to be true *menches* in the way we treat each other, whatever our differences. When someone asked Hillel to explain the entire Torah while standing on one foot, he said, "Do not do to others what is hateful to yourself." (Pirkei Avot)

# BECOMING A TRANS-INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

## Welcome for All

As anyone else, trans people come to a synagogue or Jewish organization with a complex combination of feelings and history. More often than not, we have found that trans people experience unique challenges in their communities. Although these challenges shift from person to person and congregation to congregation; there are obstacles that trans people face when worshiping in community, regardless of whether a person is newly identifying as trans or has been fully transitioned for decades, whether they openly and publicly identify as trans or they keep that information private. By extending a welcome with an informed perspective on the needs of trans people, many of these obstacles can be addressed.

## Diversity of Trans Experiences

In recent years the topic of transgenderism has emerged in popular culture in a far more comprehensive way than ever before. Celebrities who transitioned publicly, such as Laverne Cox, Caitlyn Jenner, and Chaz Bono, have added trans people to the popular culture milieu in a new way. With this new acknowledgement of trans lives in the media we also see a particular narrative of trans identity emerge. While the visibility of specific trans people can help shift social consciousness about trans people, it is important to understand that not all trans people identify in the same way.

Trans people reflect the full cultural diversity we see in this country and come from every walk of life. The relatively recent mainstream visibility has certainly enabled many trans people to live as their authentic selves in new ways. Yet, trans identities are also being discussed, critiqued, and regulated in politics, social media, and on television in new ways. It is important to understand that not all trans people live or transition – to express a gender other than the one assigned at birth – in the same ways or come from the same cultural contexts.

Many trans people never feel the need to engage in medical interventions or to choose one gender rather than another. Others take hormones or have surgery to change their bodies to become more comfortable in their own gender presentations. However, accessibility to medically necessary care is limited for many trans people. Often, there is a lack of access to knowledgeable medical staff. Financial constraints and inadequate emotional support can make transition and basic medical care prohibitive. This is changing but not fast enough to provide equal access for all trans people. Ideally, all trans people should have access to doctors and other providers who are able to work with their transgender patients to develop a plan of medical care that best meets that person's needs.

As the visibility of trans identity expands, unfortunately so does the backlash against trans people. Political commentary about trans people has a lasting impact beyond the politics and policies themselves. Faith communities play an important role in helping trans people understand that they are loved and valued, even when the media paints a different picture. Rabbis and other Jewish leaders can help reshape the narrative of trans exclusion and challenge culture bias that erroneously teaches that trans people are different and do not belong.

**Gender identity** is an inward and subjective experience, lived out in the individual person. Many trans people utilize hormone and surgical interventions to align their bodies with their inward sense of self, but many do not. It is important to honor a person's identity, regardless of their access to, or need for, medical intervention.

## The Language of Inclusion

Before we can explore the topic of inclusion in a comprehensive way, we acknowledge that it is difficult to engage in this conversation if one doesn't feel one has the right words to use. But it is important to remember that terminology and definitions are not static, language shifts and grows with the communities who use it.

LGBT communities have seen such major growth and transformation in recent decades, it is hard to pin down universally accepted definitions for how our people describe themselves. We suggest that that people not get too caught up in definitions, but rather focus on the larger issues of inclusion and *tikkun olam*. It is important to keep in mind that the only way to understand any individual's identity is to politely ask that person for clarification.

## Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

The term transgender refers to gender identity, that is, how a person understands their own subjective experience of gender and selfhood. It is not the same as sexual identity. Heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality refer to attraction, the people to whom a person is romantically and sexually inclined. Trans people experience romantic and sexual attraction that is not necessarily connected to their trans identities. Just like non-trans people, trans people can be gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, straight, queer, and questioning.

The word "**passing**" is a term that is often used in the trans community to denote whether a person is able to live unquestioned as a man or as a woman. While "passing" as a non-trans man or a non-trans woman is a goal for some trans people, it is not for others. Many view the term as problematic because it might imply a level of dishonesty, as if trans people are only able to pass as something they are not or are only valued if they pass. Instead of focusing on how well a trans person can blend in among non-trans people, it is important to honor gender identity, regardless of appearance. The purpose of transition is not necessarily to fit in but to feel that what a person feels inside matches what they express on the outside.

Congregations and organizations sometimes assume that trans people will automatically feel welcome in a community that already welcomes lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. This is not always the case. Although there are many similarities between these communities, it is important to note that the issues trans and gender non-conforming people face are not identical to those faced in regard to sexual identity.



# Inclusion of Identities

A congregation or organization that is truly inclusive encourages its members to live and grow in their own identities. Gender expression for many people is a long process of searching for wholeness. It is a beautiful gift to support a person while they are in the process of becoming themselves. People often come to Jewish communities when they are vulnerable and searching. It is the responsibility and the calling of the community to nurture those who seek spiritual wholeness. For trans people, finding gender confirmation is often an important element in becoming spiritually whole. At the same time, it is important to note that not every trans person is seeking a Jewish connection in relation to their gender identity. Particularly those who have identified as trans or gender nonconforming for a long time, might not see their gender as an issue for discussion in their Jewish community. It is important to support their need for privacy. There is no one magic formula that creates inclusion. As Jewish communities we must follow the lead of those we seek to include and allow them to define the level of importance that gender identity has in their own spiritual paths.



## Talia's Story

Coming out is often an ongoing activity both for myself and many other transgender people. When it comes to finding and joining a synagogue or Jewish community, going in often means coming out at the same time. Unfortunately, sometimes this literally happens when a transgender person is rejected by a community. When I moved to Toronto in 2016, I was without a Jewish community where I could hang my kippah and call home. I knew there were some that referred to themselves as welcoming and inclusive of trans people. At the same time, I knew that all too often this is not the practice. One quickly discovers that the message should read, "We're welcoming because we say we are!"

Thanks to some online searching I found a few communities to visit. In the end I decided on one of the progressive communities in the city. In this community LGBTQ+ people are welcomed and included in the regular activities. Although I knew a few people who were members and received good reviews from them, I was nervous. I am an out woman who is also transgender. Being transgender, while not the main part of my identity, is part of my identity. Added to this I have some aspects of my life that mean I fall into the 'disabled' category on questionnaires. I am training to be a Kohenet Hebrew priestess and pursuing formal graduate level education with the end goal of becoming a rabbi, something I have been studying toward on my own. I worried about how I would be received and whether or not there would be a place for me in the community.

Prepared for the worst, and hoping for the best, I attended High Holy Day Services and other events through the year. I am a person who enjoys being involved in community and I joined the Community Choir during the year, became involved in the LGBTQIA+ committee, and most recently joined the accessibility committee. For the LGBTQIA+ in-home shabbat I shared one of my prayers as well as gave a dvar torah on the parshah of the week. All in all, I feel welcome, embraced, and supported in the community. This was a case of not just saying they are welcoming, but living it. This community calls itself inclusive because its members are inclusive, not to mark a check box on some diversity checklist. I continue to grow in my life as a Jew, and in my learning. I ask you, the reader, how would your community respond if I walked through the door?

*Talia Johnson*

## Discussion Questions

- 1) What made you feel most welcome when you first joined your current Jewish community or organization?
- 2) What comes to mind for you when you hear the word "transgender"? What images or phrases does this topic evoke?
- 3) Can you think of examples of ways you have helped, or would like to help, other people feel welcome in your community?





# TORAH'S VIEW

Does the Torah and Rabbinic tradition teach about transgender people? Though it is true that much of our current understanding of gender identity today is modern and based on contemporary science and theory about the human mind and body, the wisdom of the Torah is often surprisingly relevant to today's issues.

Torah offers strong support for the inclusion of those whose gender is other than strictly male or female. Rabbinic literature enumerates six different gender identities, and includes stories of men who nurse children and women who perform circumcisions. Gender roles and identities are sometimes quite varied, not only socially, but even biologically.

## Genesis

According to the book of Genesis, the first human being God created did not have a specific gender. The text calls this person *ha-Adam*, the “Human.” The Hebrew word “Adam” is connected to the word *admanah* meaning *ground or earth*, so a good translation might be “earth human.”

Our Sages teach that *ha-Adam* was androgynous: Rabbi Samuel b. Nahman said, “At the time that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, created the Human, God created him as an androgynos.” Resh Lakish said, “At the time that [Adam] was created, he was made with two faces, and [God] sliced him and gave him two backs, a female one and a male one, as it says: ‘And He took from his sides’ (Genesis 2:21)” (Leviticus Rabbah 12:2. The *midrash* (interpretive story) is playing with the plural form of the word “sides” in the Torah’s account, and expanding this wordplay into a gender inclusive interpretation. The *midrash* pictures the Human as both male and female, each “side” as the frontal half of a man and a woman. Then God divides the human vertically and places a back half on each front. Evidently this was a popular interpretation of the scriptural dissonance between Genesis 1:27, which portrays the bigendered creation of humanity, and Genesis 2:18 which presents the lone human for whom God must create a companion.

Another version of the *midrash* reads: Rabbi Yirmiyah ben Elazar said: At the hour when the Holy One Blessed Be He created the first human, it was created androgynous. As it is written, ‘male and female God created them.’

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said: When the Holy One Blessed Be He created the first human, it was created with two front sides, and then God split it, creating for it two backs, a back here and a back there. (Genesis Rabbah 8:1)

## Deuteronomy

The Sages similarly reinterpret Deuteronomy 22:5 which – from a literalist perspective – appears to prohibit crossdressing. According to Talmud: “Why does Scripture say, ‘Men’s effects are not for a woman etc.?’ If it were merely to teach that a man should dress in a woman’s garment, nor a

woman in a man's garment, behold it says this is an abomination, but there is no abomination just in that! It must therefore mean that a man should not put on a woman's garment and socialize with women in order to fool them, nor a woman a man's garment and socialize with men in order to fool them.” (Nazir 59a) Thus the Sages interpret the Biblical verse on crossdressing as a ban on using disguises to trick others rather than on wearing gender variant clothing, which they understand as obviously acceptable.

## Isaiah

In ancient Israel, eunuchs (men who do not have testicles or a penis) had some resemblance to today's transgender and gender variant people in that they were not part of the binary; they were no longer considered fully male but neither were they female. Deuteronomy 23:1 excludes such people from full participation in certain rituals (from which all women were also excluded). In some ways eunuchs were similar to converts, who were viewed as neither fully foreign nor fully Israelite, and so also did not fit in the binary.

The prophet Isaiah reinterprets the law in order to welcome those who don't fit into binaries. He expands the rights of eunuchs as well as those of converts. Isaiah teaches: “Let not a convert say, ‘God will surely separate me from God's people,’ nor let a eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree.’ God says, ‘Eunuchs that observe Shabbat, who choose ways that please me, and uphold my covenant; I will give them a monument and heritage in My house, within My walls. I will give them an eternal memorial better than sons and daughters. And converts, who follow God, who love God's name, those who observe Shabbat and uphold My covenant; I will bring them to My holy mountain and give them joy in My House of Prayer. Their offerings and sacrifices are acceptable on My altar. For My house shall be called a House of Prayer for all people.’” (Isaiah 56:3-5)



# TALMUD

The Talmud tells us that the Rabbis were aware that there are different kinds of genders. Rabbinic legal texts explore at least four and perhaps as many as six gender categories. The Sages teach that each of the genders has certain kinds of rights and restrictions. The concluding thought on this topic is attributed to Rabbi Yose, who teaches, “An androgyne, he is a case unto herself, and the Sages made no decision whether it is a man or woman.” (Mishnah Bikkurim 4:5)

The Talmud also tells the story of a miraculous gender transition:

“Our Rabbis taught: It once happened that a man’s wife died and left behind a nursing child, and the man could not afford to pay a wetnurse. A miracle happened to him and his breasts opened like a woman’s breasts and he nursed his son.

R. Yosef said: Come and see how great this man was, that such a miracle was performed for him!

Abayye responded to him: Just the opposite: how terrible was this man, that the order of Creation was changed!

R. Yehudah said: Come and see how difficult it is to provide sustenance to a human being, that the order of Creation had to be changed!” (Shabbat 53b)

This story can be read in multiple ways in terms of gender transition: in favor, against, in favor if it is necessary.

## Engaging Jewish Tradition

As we read through the Jewish textual sources, we see messages of support for the full inclusion of transgender and gender different people. Where transgender and gender variant people have faced rejection, violence, and discrimination, Jewish communities can be of support, following rabbinic principles of understanding, welcome, and justice.

## Discussion Questions

- 1) What passages in Jewish texts most guide you about how to treat transgender people?
- 2) If a member of your community has a transgender family member, and is worried about what traditional Judaism believes, what words of understanding could you share with them?
- 3) What examples in Jewish history do you think are helpful in considering how to treat and include transgender people?



# WELCOMING TRANS PEOPLE INTO JEWISH COMMUNITIES

Chances are that your community is already one that cares deeply about inclusion. Congregations and organizations that seek to welcome trans people are often already supporting multiple types of inclusion in transformative and powerful ways. It is likely that you are instinctively doing many things right and that your community can become more inclusive by simply utilizing and building upon the skills and resources you already have.

## When is the best time to become more inclusive?

The time to create change and welcome trans people is now. Sometimes congregations feel that they will be able to embark on a program to become more trans inclusive once they reach some specific milestone in the future. This is particularly true for congregations that want to be fully welcoming of all, but might stumble or struggle with full acceptance of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, intermarried families or Jews of color. While acceptance of a variety of sexual, racial and other identities is helpful for any congregation that strives for full inclusion of all people, total acceptance of Jews of Color, gay/lesbian/bisexual Jews, intermarried families, disabled people, single people and other minorities from 100% of the congregation is not a prerequisite for educating the congregation about trans people. Full inclusivity demands that we move forward simultaneously on many fronts. Even congregations that are very welcoming to gay, lesbian, and bisexual Jews do not automatically have the necessary tools to fully include trans people.

## Transformation on the Bima and in the Social Hall

Religious leaders who speak from the bima regularly and lay leaders who run meetings, lead Torah study, create programs, facilitate small groups, or perform other leadership roles, have the ability to vastly impact the lives of trans people. This transformation does not occur only through direct interaction of the leader and an individual trans person, rather it happens as the culture of the community shifts to understand and welcome the trans person. It must not be the responsibility of a trans or gender non-conforming person to create the sacred space that is needed. The community can become welcoming and develop itself as a sacred refuge, regardless of whether or not trans people already attend.

For those who have the privilege of addressing the congregation or organization as a whole on a regular basis, it is important to present a number of genders into the course of the work. Sacred texts offer many examples of gender differences that are helpful to highlight. As the leaders learn about trans people in the community or in the media, it is helpful to incorporate the stories of their achievements and lives into your teachings and speeches.

## Understanding the Leadership Position, a Personal Vignette

A mainstream group of rabbis was attending a seminar on pastoral counseling for LGBT congregants. I was leading a breakout session on transgender and gender nonconforming congregants. The rabbis seemed a bit lost and nervous. One earnest young rabbi asked, "But really, how do I show that I'm welcoming?"

I answered, "You might want to display books on various topics in your waiting area and include a book or magazine about trans issues." There were a few questions more about pronouns and vocabulary. Then another rabbi asked exactly the same question, "How do I show I'm welcoming?"

This time I replied, "It's good when sermon stories refer to a diverse range of people, including trans people. You don't have to say explicitly that the person is trans, just add some details about trans life. When introducing a person in your story, you might say something like, 'Dave Cohen transitioned several years ago, and decided to grow a beard.'"

A few questions later, and yet again, another rabbi asks how she can convey that she is truly welcoming. "Well," I laughed, "the most important thing is to be actually welcoming in your heart, which is why you've come here today." The entire room laughed, and I could feel the nervousness lift.

*Rabbi Jane Rachel Litman  
CLGS Jewish Roundtable Coordinator*

# Gaining Clarity

You may encounter people whose gender presentation is different from most others in the congregation. You may not be sure how to interact initially. The simplest solution if you do not know how to address someone is to ask. The question “What pronouns do you use?” is a very easy solution to this dilemma. This question is vital in the context of rites, such as an *Aliyah*, in which an individual may be called for an honor. If you are unsure how the person identifies, it is important to learn and not to guess. To misgender a person (that is, to incorrectly name a person’s gender) in prayer or during a sacred rite undermines the identity of the person, can be personally very painful for that person and implicitly gives the message that this person’s identity is not acceptable in the community. Please bear in mind that semantics matter, sometimes the way a question is asked is equally as important as whether or not the question is asked at all. The difference between “I don’t know what to call you, what is your gender?” and “what pronouns do you use?” is significant. The former conveys discomfort, whereas the latter shows a desire to meet the individual in the space in which they are most comfortable.

# Supporting Pronoun Diversity

In a well-meaning attempt at full inclusion, many progressive religious spaces have adopted the practice of having all people indicate their pronouns while doing mandatory introductions at the beginning of classes, workshops, or events. While the motivation behind this is good, the practice can be very uncomfortable for people who are not instantly ready to come out or discuss their gender identities. There are creative solutions for this, which maintain the spirit of inclusion but don’t put people on the spot in potentially uncomfortable ways.

Name tags are a great option. Having a variety of preprinted options conveys

an acceptance of gender diversity.

Include multiple options such as they/them/theirs, zi/zir/zirs, he/him/his, she/her/hers. Blank stickers on which people can write their own pronouns are also helpful. Encourage non-trans people, particularly those with more traditional gender presentations, to also include their pronouns on name tags. It is a beautiful statement of solidarity with trans people when those individuals who never are forced to explain their own gender choose to state their pronouns. Let’s shift the responsibility of claiming one’s identity away from those who are perceived as different and open up the conversation of gender diversity and inclusion as a responsibility for the entire faith community.

## Identity is Not a “Preference”

It is important to pay attention to how this question is presented. Asking what pronouns a person uses is more helpful than the commonly asked question “What pronouns do you prefer?” For most people identity speaks to the core of being; it is not a simple preference, but a fundamental aspect of selfhood, which is why we ask what pronouns people use.

Some people experience discomfort when they have questions that are not appropriate for the situation. Rabbis, cantors and lay leaders can set boundaries on questions and also remain aware and compassionate about the discomfort of the curious. Leaders can convey the idea that it is okay to be curious, and it is okay to be uncomfortable. It is not okay to violate a person's privacy with inappropriate questions.

A spirit of inclusion is not only about extending an invitation, it is about creating a culture of comfort and safety once those invited members have arrived. A community becomes a spiritual home for trans people by widening the breadth of inclusion, welcoming trans identity in all areas of community, and avoiding the questions and/or comments that lead to people feeling unsafe and objectified.

The good news is that more and more people are learning about gender identity and transgender people through the media, resources like this one, and personal experiences with transgender people. Yet, transgender people continue to face extraordinarily high levels of discrimination and violence in our society. Many groups and individuals are working hard to change this fact. In this final section, we will detail some of the experiences that transgender people face and talk about how, as a Jewish community, we can take concrete steps to make the world safer and more equitable for people of all genders.

You may also be aware of legislation that has been introduced in the United States, maybe even in your state, that seeks to roll back protections against discrimination and to prevent transgender people from safely using appropriate restrooms. These efforts stem from a lack of knowledge and distort the truth to mistakenly say that transgender people are a threat to public safety, when in reality, transgender people are often the ones who are in danger in public places.

## Keeping Previous Names in the Past

If a person chooses to change their name as part of their transition, it is up to them whether other people find out what their former name was. Although some people are comfortable with their former name being common knowledge, many others find it important to leave their old name behind. Some trans people even refer to their previous name as their "dead name". Statements such as "I knew Jennifer back when she was Jeffrey" can be invalidating to a person's identity and a violation of their privacy.



# Curiosity and Appropriate Boundaries

In the years that the authors of this text have spent educating faith communities on trans inclusion, we have found that one of the largest stumbling blocks is boundary setting, specifically regarding curiosity about trans bodies. It is normal for people to be curious about bodies that are different from our own. However, asking questions about people's bodies makes most people feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. Jewish communities can support trans people by creating a culture that acknowledges that curiosity is valid, but that not all questions are appropriate. Communities might be perceived as hostile by trans people if they are confronted with questions about their bodies, surgeries, medical treatments, or previous names. Alternately, a trans person may wish to share this information, and other congregants might respond with discomfort.

Surgical history, genital configuration, or previous name are not relevant to participation in a Jewish congregation or organization. However, many trans people report feeling interrogated on these details. Often the inquisitive party is not actually interested in the details of a person's transition, but rather they are trying to fully understand the journey a trans person has taken. Remaining true to our basic assertion, made in the introduction, that those who care about trans inclusion mean well, let's examine what motivates this line of questioning.

When people ask "Have you had the surgery?" they bring up a highly personal reference to a trans person's most intimate body parts. This question also erroneously assumes that transitioning is a simple 1-step process. The reality is that everyone's transition is different and not all trans people transition medically. Those who do transition go through a lengthy process of evaluation, hormones, and surgeries—generally topics far too personal to be casually brought up at coffee hour.

Detailed and inappropriately personal questions may arise when the questioner is actually curious about something entirely different, but doesn't realize their own motivation in asking. Questions about the transition process often come from someone actually wanting to know if the person they are talking to feels that have reached a comfortable place in their process of transition. However, even when we mean well, our words and questions can inflict pain, so it is important to be mindful and sensitive.

## Discussion Questions

- 1) What do you feel is the most positive step towards trans inclusion that your congregation has taken so far?
- 2) Has there been a time in your life when someone approached you with questions so personal about yourself, you felt unsafe answering them? In what ways can you help establish healthy boundaries around curiosity in your own congregation or organization?
- 3) What is your own theological understanding of welcome? Why is it important to you that your Jewish community become more inclusive?

# STANDING WITH TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

## Violence

Every few weeks a transgender person is murdered in the United States because of their gender identity; the vast majority of the victims are young transgender women of color. Often these crimes go unsolved. We recognize that both racism and anti-transgender prejudice play critical roles in the death of these women. All transgender people—of all races, ages, and identities—face heightened levels of violence. Sometimes the attackers are strangers but they also include teachers, medical personnel, store clerks, intimate partners, government officials and others who should be protecting people from assault.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, the Department of Justice has recorded zero cases in which transgender people have assaulted others in the restroom. To ban transgender people from certain public spaces, such as restrooms, exposes them to increased levels of violence while doing nothing at all to protect other vulnerable people.

## Discrimination

Transgender and gender non-conforming people face unemployment levels more than twice that of the general population, with transgender people of color facing almost triple the national unemployment rate. People also face significant barriers to housing, public accommodations (like hotels, restaurants, gyms and other public spaces), medical care and more. In fact, there is no area of public life where transgender people do not face overt discrimination. People are turned away from doctor's offices, government services, education and more. Young transgender people drop out of school at alarming rates because of bullying and discrimination.

Occasionally people argue that making life very difficult for the transgender community will somehow discourage people from transitioning. This was the argument in favor of persecuting Jewish people during the Middle Ages. Oppression is wrong. In addition, as Jews, we know that oppression often strengthens resolve. The answer to difference is tolerance, not persecution.

Discrimination can range from large actions—such as firing a person simply because of their gender identity or refusing to provide a transgender person with needed health care—to small things, like refusing to address the person by the names and pronouns that are right for them. Studies have shown that higher levels of discrimination lead to greater negative impacts on the person's wellbeing, increasing rates of homelessness, suicide attempts, and substance abuse. The good news is that family acceptance and a supportive community lead to much higher levels of health and positive outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Injustice at Every Turn: Results of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, <http://www.transequality.org/issues/national-transgender-discrimination-survey>, for details.

## How can people help?

You have already taken one of the most important steps—learning about transgender people and our lives. Being aware of the gifts and blessings that transgender people bring as well as knowing about the discrimination we face is vital to building a healthy community. Thank you for taking the time to gain this information and consider it.

Our culture already teaches us the most important way to respond: treating others as we would want to be treated by them. Treating transgender people with respect and compassion, just as you would any other person, is incredibly important. When other people see you act this way, it sends an important message about what you believe and how you feel people should be treated. Regardless of how you feel about someone's personal decisions, Judaism teaches that we should treat others fairly and kindly.



## Other Vital Steps You Can Take:

**Stand up and speak out** if you see a transgender person being subjected to bullying, harassment, violence, or discrimination. No one should be targeted because of who they are. If needed, enlist the help of others. Your voice can make a crucial difference in stopping acts of abuse or harm; you could even save a life.

If people around you express fear or other negative emotions about transgender people, let them know that **you've learned the facts** that transgender people present no danger to you or your family. Make it clear that you think all people should be treated with respect and, when appropriate, let them know that this is an important aspect of Jewish values.

**Support laws in your state and on the federal level** that work to end discrimination against transgender people, including children and youth. It is vital that we resist efforts to erode or overturn these laws. These laws provide a clear path for employers and educators to follow in treating everyone fairly and make it possible for those who have experienced discrimination to address it.

**Work to end racial injustice and inequity.** Transgender people of color face higher levels of discrimination and violence when they are targeted for their race and their gender identity. Efforts to end racism will benefit those who experience the highest levels of discrimination, including transgender people.

**Address violence.** Transgender people, particularly transgender women of color, continue to be murdered at an alarming rate. Work with community leaders and public officials to decrease violence in your area. Be willing to offer space for survivors of violence, including holding vigils and memorials for those who have been killed. Sometimes victims' families have difficulty finding a religious space in which to hold a funeral; offer comfort at this most painful time by stepping up.

**Continue to improve your community** and include transgender people in your advocacy for fairer housing, quality education, safe shelters, and other needs that people have. Knowing that transgender people experience discrimination in housing, consider how they might be affected by a lack of affordable housing in your neighborhood. Because transgender people face high rates of poverty, ask if transgender people feel comfortable coming to your food pantry. If your community supports programs for the homeless, ask if transgender people are welcomed and safe at the facility. This awareness can transform the effectiveness of your programs and provide access for some of the people in greatest need who are often excluded from other places that might help them.

**Let transgender people and families with transgender children and youth know that your community is a place where they are welcome to worship and find friends.** There are likely to be more people in your community than you realize who have transgender family members. Having a safe haven in your faith community can help people deal with the negative impacts of discrimination.



People of faith play an important role as leaders in our society. We can model treating transgender people—and all others—with dignity and respect, knowing that we are all children of God. Your work to end the discrimination and suffering experienced by those who are marginalized in our society is important and needed in our world, whether you do so in large or small ways.

## Discussion Questions

- 1) What responsibility do we, as Jewish people, have to those who are being discriminated against?
- 2) How do you think your community could help those who have been victims of violence and their families?
- 3) What steps could you take as a community to show your solidarity with transgender people?

# Transgender People and Bathroom Use

Laws which seek to limit transgender people's access to public facilities or force them to use a restroom which is different from their gender presentation have been proposed—and in some cases passed—in states around the country. You can learn more about this from the National Center for Transgender Equality: <http://www.transequality.org/issues/resources/transgender-people-and-bathroom-access>

It is most important to recognize that:

- Safety and privacy in restrooms is important to all of us. In the more than 200 cities and 18 states that have laws protecting LGBTQ people from discrimination, including allowing transgender people to use the restroom which fits the gender they live every day. There has been no increase in public safety incidents in any of those places, including where there have been non-discrimination laws for a long time.
- Transgender people regularly face harassment and violence in restrooms and can suffer negative health impacts when unable to find a safe place to relieve themselves. You can read more about this in the results of the US Trans Survey: <http://www.ustranssurvey.org/preliminary-findings>
- Targeting transgender people and their bathroom use only distracts lawmakers from addressing the real problems that girls and women face. Efforts to address violence against women should focus on preventing actual dangers; blaming a minority group does nothing to help.

Attempts to prevent any one group of people from accessing public spaces is a dangerous precedent. All people should have equal access to public spaces.

# CONCLUSION

Thank you for taking the time to read this resource. We hope that the information and the discussion questions have given you new insights into trans people as well as offering you new ways to support and welcome them into your community. We hope that this is just the first step of many that you will take to support transgender people!





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