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“I think it is all about educating the community. Gay now seems to be pretty unproblematic. It is about respecting the health and safety concerns of trans people. I have some very religious relatives (I’m talking to a gay Jew) who feel that the religious practice where men and women avoid all physical contact does not match their gender. I see being both as just aspects of me – not as defining sticking points about me. I have had to go a round-about way in order to get to where I want to be. I see my being of Jewish descent in a similar way. It defined my early years in as much as it meant I went to Hebrew classes and took part in all the normal Jewish holiday traditions, but I am also an atheist, and realised as much by the time I was eight. Sure, both affected my past and my identity, but Jewish holiday traditions, which I now observe, are far more variations when it comes to sex and gender. The key for change and transformation is creating awareness. Visibility and having a voice is important, and for this reason I run LGBTQ & faith projects around heritage and oral history. My first UK initiative was Rainbow Jews (www.rainbowjews.com), and now it’s Twilight People: Stories of Gender and Faith Beyond the Binary (www.twilightpeople.com), an interfaith project that discovers the ‘hidden history’ of transgender and gender-variant people of faith in the UK past and present. This collection will become the first source of faith and transgender history in Britain.” – Surat-Shaan

Resources and Further Reading
http://transfaith.org/resources.html
(Listen in particular to the videos, ‘Joy Ladin, on Transgender Judaism’)
(Trans Jewish Zine!!!)
http://planningrainbows.wordpress.com/
(Blog of Emily Aviva Kapor, Trans Rabbi)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Chg_CYGVxUk&feature=youtu.be
https://www.thesenderbook.com/
https://www.rimes.barnard.edu/altum.zine-spotlight
http://joices.com/author/gayest/
http://www.transhebrew.org/index.html
http://www.twilightpeople.com/
http://www.transtorah.org/

Transgender

Being transgender is when your gender identity is different to the gender you were assigned at birth.

This differs from sex assigned at birth which is about biology but it is not as simple or definitive as you may think. It’s about chromosomes, DNA, hormones, genitalia (both internal and external) and more. There are far more variations when it comes to sex than commonly taught.

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**Growing up as part of a strict gender binary in the Jewish community gave me relatively few opportunities to explore my gender identity.**

Sarah

“Growing up as part of a strict gender binary in the Jewish community gave me relatively few opportunities to explore my gender identity. I found much of the tradition that women were assigned uncomfortable, but I wasn’t entirely sure why. I had to take a step away from the Jewish community to give myself the space to come to terms with my gender identity. I am a trans man, and want to engage with my Judaism in that way. I believe Judaism should be open to all genders and I want the communities I’m involved in to respect my gender identity. For me supporting different identities is a Jewish value.”

Anonymous

“I feel blessed to be part of a welcoming and inclusive faith community. Progressive Judaism is egalitarian by ethos, and the Liberal Jewish Movement UK that I work for is a trail-blazer on the LGBTQ agenda. The trouble is that we don’t have many non-binary or trans people in our communities, so people are still not quite aware of our needs and requirements, e.g. correct pronouns. But they are open and overall support has been great, albeit progress is at a slow rate – we have now gender-neutral toilets and some rabbis are discussing amendments in e.g. siddur and life cycle events.”

Sarah

Trans identities in Torah and halachah

Unlike sexuality, trans identity and gender non-conformity actually has a rich history in Jewish law (halachah). As well as the traditional categories of male and female there are also references to other genders.

Androgynos: A person who has both “male” and “female” sexual characteristics. 149 references in Mishna and Talmud (1st–8th Centuries CE). 350 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes (2nd – 16th Centuries CE).

Tumtum: A person whose sexual characteristics are indeterminate or obscure. 18 references in Mishna and Talmud, 155 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.

Aylonit: A person who is identified as “female” at birth but develops “male” characteristics as puberty and/or is lacking a penis. A aylonit can be “naturally” a saris (saris hamah) or become one through human intervention (saris adam). 156 references in Mishna and Talmud, 179 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.

As more gender fluid identities were marginalised from mainstream Judaism so ritual, language and law were developed around the gender binary, limiting the inclusion of trans people in modern Judaism.

“Much of our community practices and rituals are built around the roles for women and men, for example the need in many synagogues for women and men to sit on separate sides of the mechitza. For people transitioning their gender may be challenged when they try to sit on the side of the mechitza they belong on. Similarly, for those who do not identify with the gender binary the decision of where to sit can be an immense struggle.”

Dex

“I think there are a lot of barriers due to how so much of Jewish tradition is quite strict in its wording and rulings. There needs to be accommodation outside the rigid binaries that are presented within the Torah and Talmud. I think, especially in Reform synagogues, this is becoming less of a problem, but I would like to see options open up – even for cisgender individuals. Everybody has a right to express their faith however they deem fit, and share it with others.”

Anonymous

Denominational approaches

“Personally, the only barriers I have faced are from the United Synagogue (US). I have been a member of the US for 30 years. When I transitioned, my rabbi suggested (well intended) that it may be better for me to join another US shul and make a new start. I have recently found out that the rabbi at the new shul went to the Beth Din for a ruling before he would agree to my joining the shul. I also found out that the US are concerned about who within the chevra kadisha would wash me when I die – man or woman. I also found out that the Board of Management at my new shul discussed at length which toilet I would use – the old chestnut. I was brought up in the US but I am now rethinking which shul I belong to.

Sarit: I have experienced certain long standing friends no longer continuing the friendship after my transition.”

Bella

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Sura-Shaan

“No denomination has yet taken the proactive steps needed to fully include and celebrate trans people as equals. Although some denominations have gender as a smaller feature in the literature, Hebrew – the language of much of our liturgy – is still innately gendered making it difficult for many Trans people to relate to prayer.”

Anonymous

What needs to change – renewing tradition for the inclusion of all genders.

“For every barrier Trans people and allies are working towards solutions. For example, currently a queer and trans inclusive siddur is being developed that deals with some of the gendered issues in the Hebrew language. This will exist alongside already renewed liturgy that has removed many overt gender references.

“Other traditions such as marriage ceremonies, bar and bat mitzvahs are all beginning to be examined with a genderless lens. “Critically trans voices in the Jewish community are providing the impetus to create new streams of thought and liturgy that reimage tradition. For example, the role of the mikveh in supporting transition, as well as creating new liturgy for ‘coming out’ and ‘chest binding.”

Anonymous

“To be a better ally to any trans or gender non-conforming person, all that needs to be done is to respect that person like you would anyone else. Don’t give us special treatment. We aren’t any better or worse people because we are trans. Don’t walk on egg-shells around us, most won’t bite. (Some people aren’t friendly. Some of these people happen to be trans.) Don’t feel scared to ask questions, but please keep those questions respectful if we aren’t friends, don’t bother asking about my genitals unless you want me to ask for all the details of your last gynecologist appointment.”

Sarah