



Transgender Jewish voices

Trans – an introduction

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 definite 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.

Intersex is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is both with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the normative definitions of female or male. A term formally used (often by the medical community) is hermaphrodite. This is an older term considered to be offensive/inappropriate. This is as it stigmatises and does not reflect modern understanding of intersex conditions

Gender identity is the way in which an individual understands and expresses their own gender. Although many choose to express their gender identity externally according to social norms, gender identity is internal and exists regardless of biological sex and social perceptions and expressions of gender.

Some people very happily live their whole lives knowing the sex/gender they were assigned at birth is their gender, this is known as **cis-gender** (cis literally comes from the Latin term – same). **Trans** or **transgender** is an umbrella term for anyone whose sex assigned at birth does not match their gender.

Within the **trans** umbrella there are numerous identities, this can include someone who has transitioned from one binary gender to another, but it can also

include those who identify with a new gender, no gender or multiple genders. Terms like **gender queer**, **gender fluid** and **gender non-conforming** are all words used to describe those whose identity does not subscribe to the traditional gender binary. The word **queer** is also often used by those who identify with a non-normative sexuality or gender identity, arguably being reclaimed from its use as an insult. Some transgender people modify their bodies through medical means, and some do not. In the UK, to be protected under the Equality Act from gender reassignment discrimination, you do not need to have undergone any specific treatment or surgery to change from your birth sex to your preferred gender.

What does being Trans and Jewish mean to you?

“Being transgender is something that just happens to be something about me. I try not to let it define me in any way. I just want to be me – a woman who loves music, science and video games. My being trans just means that 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 the culture in which I am surrounded by, but I see being both as just aspects of me – not as defining sticking points about me.

I have some very religious relatives (I'm talking shomer negiah) who have all been incredibly accepting of my being trans. One of my most religious relatives actually had her wedding two months after I came out and she asked me if I wanted to be a bridesmaid. Sadly, it*

needs to be said that I am lucky to have had such an experience, as I am aware not all trans people get such a reaction, especially from more religious family members.” – Sarah

“My identity is very tenuous to grasp. Sometimes, I find it very difficult to define what I am, and I feel like I can never find adequate words to describe it. That’s okay, but having a Jewish identity gives you a rooting. You feel as though you’re integrally part of something, despite how detached from it you can become during life experiences. I think it’s comforting to know you will always belong somewhere, even if you don’t quite know who or what you are.” – Anonymous

“When I transitioned, I stepped out of the “straight world”. I was concerned about losing my Jewish identity. This was not the case. I have found much support in the Liberal/ Reform, the Masorti movement and some of the United Synagogue. I have had to adapt within the United Synagogue to the hugely different roles of the genders.” – Bella

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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, 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

“If I had to label myself, I would probably describe myself as a ‘transmasculine, non-binary, progressive Jew from a mixed heritage’. I do however feel that my identity is a lot more fluid and complex on every level.” – Surat-Shaan

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 obscured. 181 references in Mishna and Talmud; 335 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.

Aylonit: A person who is identified as “female” at birth but develops “male” characteristics at puberty and is infertile. 80 references in Mishna and Talmud; 40 in classical midrash and Jewish law codes.

Saris: A person who is identified as “male” at birth but develops “female” characteristics as puberty and/or is lacking a penis. A saris can be “naturally” a saris (*saris hamah*), or become one through human intervention (*saris adam*). 156 references in Mishna and Talmud; 379 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 texts. 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

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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 intentioned) 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.

“Socially I have experienced certain long standing friends no longer continuing the friendship after my transition.” – Bella

“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 community, 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-

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neutral toilets and some rabbis are discussing amendments in e.g. siddur and life cycle events.” – Surat-Shaan

“No denomination has yet taken the proactive steps needed to fully include and celebrate trans people in our communities. 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 batmitzvah 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 reimagine 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 those 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

“I feel that asking the trans community what they need would often be the best option. Each community, in different places, have varying needs.”

“Support trans Jews within gendered religious spaces to access those that feel most suitable to them.

Jewish women: Embrace transfeminine people into women’s spaces in the community. Help them engage in feminine ritual on their own terms. If someone wants to wear a tallit and kippah, and light candles, support them.

Whilst we understand that gendered spaces are integral to Judaism (and mainstream society), make it explicitly clear that these are flexible gendered terms and that trans people will always be welcome. Do not police people’s access to gendered spaces. We know ourselves better than you do.

Faith is personal and queer and trans Jews must be supported in navigating faith and tradition on own terms. There is no guidebook to support us as we are all individuals so talk to people and keep us in mind when creating spaces.” – Dex

“On a rabbinical level, gender neutral ba(r/t) mitzvahs, ceremonies and prayers would be great. Allowing people to express themselves, and creating spaces in which trans and queer people feel safe would be more general advice. I feel that asking the trans community what they need would often be the best option. Each community, in different places, have varying needs.” – Anonymous

“I think it is all about educating the community. Gay now seems to be pretty mainstream. Transgender is currently, in my opinion, where gay was 20 years ago. Transgender is I think the “flavour of the month” in the press. I think that by talking to the community and explaining the background to transgender we can put them back in their comfort zones – a lot of people I meet haven’t met someone before who is transgender, I have to be understanding and put them at their ease. The more allies we have the easier it will be.” – Bella

“The key for change and transformation is creating awareness. Visibility and having a voice is important, and for this reason I run LGBTQI & 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://transtorah.org/resources.html>

(Listen in particular to the videos, ‘Joy Ladin, on Transgender Judaism’)

http://www.qzap.org/v5/gallery/main.php?g2_view=core.DownloadItem&g2_itemId=1552
(Trans Jewish Zine!!!!)

<http://forward.com/news/180303/first-generation-of-transgender-rabbis-claims-plac/>

<https://plantingrainbows.wordpress.com/>
(Blog of Emily Aviva Kapor, Trans Rabbi)

<http://www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/2013/11/20/living-in-a-transphobic-world-reflections-on-transgender-day-of-remembrance/>

http://www.transtorah.org/PDFs/Classical_Jewish_Terms_for_Gender_Diversity.pdf

<http://forward.com/articles/181849/marking-gender-transition-in-the-mikveh/>

<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/145663/schmekel-transgender-punk-band>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cap-CYyGVvU&ab_channel=Schmekel

<http://www.thegenderbook.com/>

<https://zines.barnard.edu/timtum-zine-spotlight>

<http://jvoices.com/author/gavriel/>

<http://forward.com/opinion/309407/would-maimonides-call-her-caitlyn-or-bruce-jenner/>

<http://transtorah.org/index.html>

<http://www.twilightpeople.com/>

www.isna.org

Torah Queeries

Leslie Fienberg: Transgender Warriors, Stone Butch Blues. (Historical Books)

Kate Bornstein: Kate Bornstein is a Queer and Pleasant Danger (Autobiographical film)

Working in the UK Jewish community to promote LGBT inclusion

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