

## Making Your Jewish Community Trans-Friendly

by Rabbi Elliot Kukla and Reuben Zellman, 2007

*“And God created the human being in God’s own image...”*  
— Genesis 1:27

### What Does “Transgender” Mean?

“Transgender” and “trans” are broad terms. They can include anyone who knows themselves to be a gender that is different than the gender they were assigned at birth. For example, a person may have been raised as a boy, but now see herself as completely female.

Other trans people may have an alternate gender identity that is neither male nor female, and for some people their gender identity may vary at different points in their lives. Some transgender people modify their bodies through medical means, and some do not.

### What’s at Stake?

Transphobia, the fear of gender variance in society, impacts all parts of life. Children who do not conform to conventional gender expectations often experience physical, verbal, and sexual abuse at home and at school. As a result, transgender youth are much more likely to drop out of school, be disowned by their families, or commit suicide. Transgender adults face discrimination in employment, healthcare, and social services.

Unfortunately, the Jewish community is equally impacted by transphobia. As a result, many trans and gender-nonconforming individuals feel unwelcome in synagogues and other Jewish institutions, and cannot access spiritual care, social support, and Jewish community life.

### How to Make Your Jewish Community More Trans-Friendly

Synagogues and other Jewish organizations are making changes and developing programming to educate members about transgender issues. The following are some examples of steps institutions have taken to become more inclusive and welcoming. As you implement changes, make sure to work with and support the leadership of transgender people themselves whenever possible.

## EDUCATION

- Invite the whole community to a panel discussion, workshop, or other event that will offer information and open up dialogue about transgender issues.
- Offer an adult education class or sermon about gender diversity in Jewish texts or transgender issues in general.
- Advertise, host, or co-sponsor other organizations' transgender-related programs.
- Assess what messages are conveyed in your religious school or children's programs about gender and gender roles. Make sure there is support for trans and gender-nonconforming children and parents.

## FACILITIES

Create a non-gender-specific restroom that is available to everyone. If you already have a single-stall restroom in your building, this can be easily accomplished by covering the “Men” or “Women” sign with an “All-Gender Restroom” sign. This applies to temporary, shared or rental facilities also.

In buildings where a single-stall restroom does not already exist, it may be more complicated to create restroom options that will make all members of your community feel comfortable. However, doing this work sends a very important message about the accessibility of your community. Many transgender people decide where they will go based upon whether there is a trans-friendly restroom or not.

## LANGUAGE

Let people know that you are trans-inclusive by using welcoming language. This is very important. In newsletters, event announcements, sermons etc., instead of saying “this event welcomes men and women,” try “all genders welcome”; rather than talking about “both men and women,” try “people of all genders.” Saying that your community welcomes “everyone” is not enough. Research shows that transgender, as well as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, often assume that the word “everyone” does not include them.

## OUTREACH

Create an outreach plan that includes the changes your community is making. Remember that the world at large is not very welcoming to transgender people. Therefore, trans people often assume that they are not welcome or included in your community, unless it is stated

otherwise. Publicize the trans-inclusive steps that your community has taken, as well as the programs that you are planning. This lets trans people know that your community cares about being an affirming place for them.

## **POLICY**

Include “gender identity” and “gender expression” in your organization’s non-discrimination and anti-harassment policy.

## **POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ACTION**

Include transgender and gender diversity issues as part of your community’s social action work. Support transgender community services and advocacy organizations.

## **RITUAL**

- Be prepared to incorporate or develop new rituals or adapt existing ones in order to be trans-inclusive. How comfortable might a trans person be marking a wedding, b’nei mitzvah, conversion, loss, or other life-cycle event in your congregation? How open could they be about their identity from the bimah? Transgender people often experience unique life-cycle events, such as moments of gender transition or a name change. Some wish to mark these events in a Jewish way, either publicly or privately.
- Listen carefully to the needs that transgender people express, and be especially sensitive around vulnerable experiences such as the mikveh or illness. Be open to change and try to accommodate those needs to the greatest possible extent, even if it’s not the way things are “usually” done.
- If your synagogue has a mechitzah (divider between men’s and women’s seating), support transgender people in praying where they feel comfortable.
- Adapt liturgy so that it is more inclusive of all genders. Include non-gendered and/or multi-gendered options for people and for God in your prayerbook.
- Observe the National Transgender Day of Remembrance (November 20<sup>th</sup>). This can be as simple as adding a memorial reading in your Shabbat service. For more information on this day visit: [www.gender.org/remember](http://www.gender.org/remember).

## MORE INFORMATION & RESOURCES

- **Jewish Mosaic: The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity** hosts TransTexts, an online guide to transzgender issues in Jewish sacred texts. They also maintain a growing archive of trans-related documents, essays, and Torah commentaries through their LGBT Resource Library and Torah Queeries project. You can also find a guide to Transgender Etiquette/Support 101 on their website: [www.jewishmosaic.org](http://www.jewishmosaic.org).
- **The Sylvia Riviera Law Project** offers educational and training materials as well as information on the social and legal impacts of transphobia. [www.srlp.org](http://www.srlp.org).
- People who are intersex face issues that are related to those faced by trans people, but are not the same. The archived website of the former **Intersex Society of North America**, [www.isna.org](http://www.isna.org), offers information and resources on intersexuality. **The Accord Alliance** also offers related information and links to support groups: [www.accordalliance.org](http://www.accordalliance.org).
- **The National Center for Transgender Equality** is dedicated to advancing the equality of transgender people through advocacy, collaboration and empowerment. Their website includes 52 things you can do to support transgender equality: [www.nctequality.org](http://www.nctequality.org).
- The Children's National Medical Center in Washington, DC, hosts the **Children's Gender and Sexuality Advocacy and Education Program**. This program provides outreach to families and education to professionals in order to support and affirm children who do not fit society's definition of idealized masculinity/femininity or sexual orientation. [www.dccchildrens.com/gendervariance](http://www.dccchildrens.com/gendervariance).
- For basic definitions of many terms associated with trans identity, as well as community information, and tips for friends and allies, visit **Trans@MIT**: <http://web.mit.edu/trans>. We also recommend Trans Etiquette/Respect/Support 101, available at [www.trans Torah.org/resources.html](http://www.trans Torah.org/resources.html).