

Transgender 101: Gender Diversity in Judaism

By Rabbi Eli Kukla and Reuben Zellman¹

Two and a half hours

Enduring Understanding:

Gender rigidity impacts everyone. Judaism recognizes that gender is complex and provides us with the tools to build a community that celebrates gender diversity.

Goals:

Students Will Be Able To...

- Recognize that gender is complicated for everyone whether or not you are transgender or intersex.
- Understand some of the vocabulary that is used by individuals within the transgender, gender nonconforming and intersex communities to self-identify, as well as some of the texts that are used in classical Judaism to refer to gender diversity.
- Know how to find more information on gender diversity.
- Take action steps to build a congregation that is welcoming to transgender, gender nonconforming and intersex individuals

Age: Adults and youth groups.

Notes for Facillitator:

This workshop is designed to introduce congregations to thinking about transgender issues. Although there are a number of more specific terms used by individuals to self-identify (see the “People and Labels” section of this workshop), “transgender” can be understood as a broad category that encompasses many different types of gender diversity. If you are unfamiliar with these issues, you should consider seeing if there is a transgender member of your congregation or in the wider community who can help you prepare for this workshop. Most major urban centers have an LGBT

¹ Many thanks to S.C.K. Spingarn for contributing sources, activities and ideas to this workshop.

community center and if you call this number, they might be able to help you find someone who can help you. In more rural areas, you may still be able to find a transgender speaker through an internet search. We recommend thinking about complementing this workshop by inviting a transgender speaker to share their story during Shabbat services or to join your congregation at another time. **If you feel like you need a trained facilitator to run this workshop email Eli and Reuben at transtorah@gmail.com and we will try to find someone in your area.**

Here is a checklist of some things to keep in mind to guide you in creating a meaningful workshop based on this curriculum:

Facilitators should...

- Understand and explain the difference between “sex” (physiological characteristics) and “gender” (social roles and behaviors). These two categories are separate, but interrelated for most people. *Both* sex and gender can be complex for transgender and intersex individuals.
- Underline that everyone’s gender is complicated including people who are not transgender or intersex.
- Emphasize that there are many types of transgender experience: some people choose to modify their physical appearance with surgeries and/or hormone therapies, while others may want to take these steps but can’t yet afford them, still others have chosen not to take these steps at all. These decisions are personal and should not effect how much we respect seeing someone else’s gender, choice of name, pronoun or identification.
- Give equal weight to the experiences of M2F (male to female), F2M (female to male) and gender queer people (individuals who identify as both male and female, neither male nor female or claim an alternate gender identify). For more information see the “People and Labels” section.
- Point out that intersex experiences raise unique issues that may not be fully covered in this workshop.

- Validate that this may be uncomfortable topic for some people and they should look for help beyond this workshop.
- Invite a transgender speaker to the congregation in conjunction with this workshop.
- **Remember (and remind others) that there may be transgender and/or intersex people in the group and the facilitator may not know it.**

1. Set Induction:

10 minutes

Read the following statements and asks participants to place themselves in a line according to how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement. The far right signifies “completely agree”, the far left “completely disagree.” All spots in the middle indicate shades of agreement. These statements are traditionally related to either masculinity or femininity. Participants are likely to find that they place themselves in a range of locations depending on the question. The point of this activity is to get participants up and moving and thinking about their own gender. They should be able to visually see in a light-handed way, that everyone has a complex gender that does not fit simply into one of two categories.

Statements:

- I currently or would like to make parenting a primary part of my life
- I can fix things
- I like to cook
- I have been told not to cry
- I have worried that I don't look tough enough
- I have exercised to make myself look tougher
- I have worried that I don't look beautiful enough
- I have felt afraid walking home alone at night
- I am or would like to be a financial supporter of other family members
- I sometimes prevent myself from expressing affection
- I have pretended to be less intelligent than I am to protect someone else's ego

- I have dieted
- I carry a purse
- I have been asked whether or not I am a boy or a girl
- I have at one point in my life had long hair
- I play sports
- I like to take care of other people

2. Gender “Cues” Activity:

40 Minutes

Ask the group how quickly they decide whether the people they meet are either male or female. What kind of “cues” do they use to make this decision? On two large sheets of paper quickly brainstorm two lists of gender “cues” one titled: “man” and one titled “woman.” Cues may be things like: “Man” = facial hair, Adam’s apple, loud voice, can fix things, takes up physical space, etc.; “Woman” = crossing legs, make-up and jewelry, high voice, etc. The facilitator should go over the lists and get people to think about what types of categories these cues fall into, and how we respond to these cues in both men and women. The point of this exercise is to begin to see how quickly we judge other peoples genders, how many of these “cues” are culturally determined and how often traditionally “male” cues are possessed by “women” and vice versa.

Next brainstorm two lists of gender cues called “Jewish man” and “Jewish woman.” Some of the cues might include: “Jewish man” = studious; nerdy; *can’t* fix things; etc. “Jewish woman” = loud voice, powerful, controlling, etc. The facilitator should point out how different these lists are from the original brainstorm which highlights the cultural role of gender. Many of these gender stereotypes are equally rigid and harmful, but Judaism offers us an alternate model for thinking about gender.

After this group activity ask participants to turn to a partner and discuss these questions about gender “cues”:

Pair and Share:

- How do you feel about these lists? Do you personally feel confined by them?
What is your reaction if you discover that you your first assumption about

someone's gender, based on some of these "cues", was wrong? How do you feel if someone makes an incorrect assumption about your own gender or the gender of someone close to you?

3. People and Labels

20 Minutes

This exercise begins with a worksheet **HANDOUT #1** to help each participant think critically about familiar language, as well as to discover language that is new to them. The worksheet can serve as a basis for questions and further clarification. The format of the worksheet is a simple matching activity. Participants try to match each description with the term that denotes it. After each participant has had the opportunity to try to complete the worksheet individually the facilitator should go over all of the vocabulary as a group. The facilitator should emphasize that vocabulary is constantly changing and expanding to meet the needs of individuals struggling to be better understood and to have their basic healthcare, educational and workplace needs met.

Matching Guide for the facilitator for this exercise: (5,A; 3,B; 1,C; 7,D; 10, E; 2, F; 9, G; 4, H; 8, I; 11, J; 6, K)

4. Text Study

40 Minutes

The facilitator should explain that not all language for gender diversity is new. The Mishna and the Talmud (the earliest forms of Jewish law and folklore, which were compiled between the first and the seventh centuries) extensively explore the role of

exceptionally gendered individuals in Jewish society. In addition to *ish* and *isha*, man and woman, our Sages identify four other genders. There is the *androgynos*, a person with both male and female sexual characteristics. The *tumtum*, a person with neither fully developed male or female genitals. The *ay'lonit* is a person who was assigned female gender at birth, but developed male characteristics during maturation. The *saris*, is a person who is assigned male gender at birth but lacks male genitals (either since birth or due to a medical intervention.) The midrash (in *Bereshit Rabah*) posits that Adam, the first human being, was actually an *androgynos*. While in the Babylonian Talmud (Yevamot 64a) the radical claim is made that Abraham and Sarah were *tumtumim*, people with indeterminate gender.

Divide the group into “chevruta” (study partners) to spend approximately 20 minutes reading through the text in **HANDOUT #2** and beginning to answer the study questions. The group should then come back together to discuss the text and answering the study questions in greater depth, focusing on the final question.

5. Action Steps

30 Minutes

During this part of the workshop, the group has an opportunity to begin transforming your learning into action. It may be helpful for the facilitator to think in terms of key areas of synagogue life: language; facilities; political and social action; ritual; education.²

² For detailed suggestions and guidance with this discussion, see the article entitled “Making Your Community More Transgender-Friendly: A Guide for Individuals and Congregations,” which is reprinted in this edition of *Kulanu*.

Pair and Share: Turn to a new study partner and discuss the following question. Based on this learning in order to make your congregation more welcoming for transgender and intersex people what is one thing you have done in the **past** that you would like to change, one thing you are currently doing in the **present** that you would like to continue doing and one thing you can commit to doing in the **future**?

Group: Come back together as a group and share some of the suggestions that were made for future commitments. Try to agree to at least one action that you will undertake as a community in the coming year. Some possibilities might include:

- Change the language used in your publicity to say “all genders welcome” as opposed to “open to both men and women” for an upcoming event
- Create a gender-neutral bathroom in your synagogue
- Include a special prayer or reading before mourner’s *kaddish* as a part of Shabbat services in honor of Transgender Day of Remembrance on November 20 that honors the victims of gender-based murders
- Publicly celebrate a lifecycle of a transgender member of your community³

Finally, give participants a reading list (**HANDOUT #3**) that will help them to get educated about this issue and fulfill these commitments!

6. Check-out:

10 minutes

Go around the room and invite participants to share how they are feeling right now. Also, ask participants to offer one word that describes their self-image of their own gender (suggestions: fluid, sexy, soft, strong, shifting, tomboy, feminine, tough, sissy...)

³ For an example of a ritual that celebrates transgender milestones see “A Blessing for Gender Transitioning” by Rabbi Eli Kukla reprinted in this edition of *Kulanu*

“People and Labels”

The information that follows is often presented as “Terms and Definitions.” Using the title “Terms and Definitions”, and placing “terms” first, can have the effect of privileging the ‘terms’—as if they are always *true*, *permanent*, and *necessary* ways of describing people and their experience, appearance, behavior or choices.

Instead, we describe “Aspects of Some People’s Lives or Bodies” first, and *then* list the ‘Labels’ currently used to describe those people or their experience, appearance, behavior or choices. At best, a label can describe only *an aspect* of who someone is or chooses to be.

Some of these labels have been coined by people who do not have the traits or experience that the labels purport to describe. Some of the labels have been coined or chosen by those who do have the traits or experience that the labels are intended to describe. These labels may or may not capture, may or may not distort, may or may not disparage, may or may not honor the person that they are meant to describe. The only way to know how any individual truly identifies is to ask them.

In every time and place, some labels mean different things to different people, and are used differently by different people. Since the mid-1990s, a great deal of language has emerged to discuss gender-queer experience; and the language continues to change and expand quickly. You may find other sources that “define” these “terms” somewhat differently.

Match the Following “People” (1-11) with the “Labels” (A-K):

“People”

1. The aspect of a person that describes the relationship between the gender they consider themselves to be and the gender of the people to whom they are attracted.
2. A person’s inner understanding of what gender(s) they belong to or identify. This is each person’s unique knowing or feeling, and is separate from a person’s physical body or appearance (although often related.)
3. Outward behaviors and appearances (e.g. hair, clothing, voice, body language) by which people manifest their gender identity or gender choices.)
4. The set of physical traits (chromosomes, hormones, gonads, internal and external sexual and reproductive organs) which are, in Western society, culturally and medically associated with a particular gender or combination of genders. It is commonly believed that there are only two ‘packages’ of these traits—one called ‘male’, and the other called ‘female’.
5. A person who appeared to be, or was assigned at birth to be, female, and was raised as a girl, who knows himself to be male, and who wishes to or does live as a male part or all of the time.
6. A person who appeared to be, or was assigned at birth to be, male, and was raised as a boy, who knows herself to be female, and who wishes to or does live as a woman part or all of the time.
7. A physical status consisting of a combination of “male” and “female” sexual traits (chromosomes, anatomy, hormones)—for example, a person with XX chromosomes and a penis.
8. An umbrella term that can include anyone whose gender identity, expression, or behavior is outside of social norms of women who are ‘feminine’ and men who are ‘masculine’.
9. A broad political and cultural identity that includes many (but not all) lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, as well as others who see their sexuality as falling outside of mainstream heterosexual norms.
10. Anyone who does not identify with the gender that they were assigned at birth. This can include people who take medical steps to modify their appearance and those who do not.
11. Anyone who sees their gender as falling outside of mainstream understandings of “male” and “female”, this can include transgender men and women, people who identify as neither male nor female, both male and female or who claim an alternate gender identity.

“Labels”

A. FTM (‘female to-male’; also transgender woman, transwoman)

B. Gender expression

C. Sexual Orientation (homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, pansexual, queer)

D. Intersex

E. Transgender

F. Gender Identity (female, gender-queer, trans, bigender, two-spirit, male, femme, boydyke...)

G. Queer

H. Biological sex (male, female, many different ways of being intersex)

I. Gender non-conforming

J. Gender-queer

K. MTF (‘male to-female’; also transgender man, transman)

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Text Study on Mishna Bikkurim 4 [abridged text]

Mishna 1

An *Androgynos* is in some respects legally equivalent to men, and in some respects legally equivalent to women, in some respects legally equivalent to men and women, and in some respects legally equivalent to neither men nor women.

Mishna 2

How is the androgynos legally equivalent to men? The androgynos conveys impurity with white [penile discharge] like men, dresses like men, marries but is not taken in marriage like men... is not financially supported like the daughters... and is responsible for all the commandments uttered in the Torah like men.

Mishna 3

How is the androgynos legally equivalent to women? The androgynos conveys impurity with red [menstrual blood] like women, cannot be left alone with men like women... does not inherit with the sons like women, does not eat of the really Holy Holy Things [of the Temple] and is not fit to give testimony like women...

Mishna 4

How is the androgynos legally equivalent to men and women? One is liable for hitting and cursing the androgynos as it is with men and women. The one who kills the androgynos by accident is exiled and the one who [kills] intentionally is executed as it is with men and women...

Mishna 5

How is the androgynos legally equivalent to neither men nor women? Unlike men and women, the androgynos is not sold as a Hebrew slave, because unlike men and women, the androgynos cannot be valued... Rabbi Yose says: an androgynos is a created being of its own.

Questions on Mishna Bikkurim 4

- In what ways is the androgynos legally equivalent to a man? In what ways is the androgynos legally equivalent to a woman? Equivalent to neither men nor women? Equivalent to both men and women? Try to make a list. How do these lists compare to the opening brainstorm on gender “cues”?
- Can you use this text to think about the way you read gender “cues” in a contemporary context?
- Are you surprised by this text? Does it change your image of “traditional” Jewish gender?
- **What does it mean to you to be “a created being of its own”? Do you feel like a uniquely created being? How would the world be different if we treated everyone as uniquely created beings?**

Translations and text study questions created by Rabbi Eli Kukla, 2006. This is based on my own research; there are many ways to read these texts. For more information transtorah@gmail.com.

Reading List

Transgender 101

My Gender Workbook; Auth: Kate Bornstein

Sex Changes; Auth: Pat Califia

Stone Butch Blues; Auth: Leslie Feinberg

Transgender Warriors; Auth: Leslie Feinberg

Two Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality and Spirituality;
Auth: Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas & Sabine Lang (ed)

The Last Time I Wore a Dress: A Memoir; Auth: Daphne Scholinski

Read My Lips: sexual subversion and the end of gender. Auth: Riki Anne Wilchins

Intersex 101

Lessons from the Intersexed; Auth: Susanne Kessler

Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self. Auth: Sharon E. Preves

Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex; Auth: Alice Dreger

Gender Theory

Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality
Auth: Anne Fausto-Sterling

Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud. Auth: Thomas Laqueur

Providing Services

Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines, Practical Information and Personal Accounts; Auth: Gianna E. Israel and Donald E. Tarver II, M.D.

Websites:

Transgender Law: The Sylvia Riviera Law Project: www.srlp.org

Transgender Education: The International Foundation for Gender Education
www.ifge.org

Transgender General: www.gender.org

Intersex Issues: The Intersex Society of North America: www.isna.org; Bodies Like
Ours: www.bodieslikeours.org

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