

Dear Chavraya,

There are days, weeks, seasons of life when events cascade, taking our breath away, churning and swirling around us. In the tumult that threatens to overwhelm there are rays of bright light that guide us on, helping us to keep our eyes on the prize. This has been such week, such a time, so much pain and so much hope, how to hold it all together, still to believe.

We have seen in Charleston the fierce racism that belies American progress and civility that calls all of us to account and to be agents of change. How, we wonder can people even debate whether a flag of hate and injustice should come down. We feel the pain of those among us scarred forever by the Marathon bombing, and we wonder how taking another life, however debased, will bring healing or teach that killing is wrong. Feeling pain beyond borders of nations and peoples, we hear the news of so many slaughtered in Tunisia. Climate disaster threatens now not later and nations dither. The rays of light emerge as surely as each day's dawn, stirrings of hope amidst the horror. The Pope gives voice to the cries of earth and planet, calling for awe to challenge despair, for action to save the precious gift of God's creation. The Supreme Court ruled this week on behalf of life, not once but twice. Still so far as a nation from health care as a birthright, nevertheless the court once again affirmed at least the current baby steps toward health care for all. And in the crowing announcement of the court, equal marriage as birthright for all who love.

So too in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Chukat*, a swirling of stresses and strains, hope hiding as sunshine beyond the clouds. Challenged to pursue life in the face of death, mourning for Miriam and Aaron. Teaching comes amidst the din, needing to search, to learn from failure, that becoming its own lesson. Hope is held out as a way of response to all that threatens life, to learn even from Moses' mistakes in the way of the Torah's teaching. As the people journey *toward the sunrise/mi'mizrach ha'shamesh*, they pass through *the wastelands of the transitions/b'i'yay ha'avarim* (in the way of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's beautiful translation of 21:11). And so we journey toward the sunrise through the wastelands of transitions. Change does not come easily, but it comes. At times we feel the despair of being in the wastelands, but we keep going toward the sunrise. So we feel the warm rays of sunshine in the affirmation of equal marriage for the entire nation, a reminder that change is possible, that we will get there, someday to reach the dawn of a truly just and caring society and world.

There was one more local expression of hope during these days. The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis affirmed unanimously at its year-end general meeting a statement for Transgender Inclusion. The statement was prepared by the Public Policy Committee of the MBR, which I have the honor of chairing. Not too many years ago the committee was not prepared to address the issue of transgender needs and rights. I share the statement below and attached as it was adopted by the MBR and is now being disseminated. So may we continue through the wastelands of transitions on our journey toward the sunrise.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor

The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis – Statement on Transgender Inclusion

Ma rabu ma'asecha Adonai, kulam b'hochma asita
How great are Your works, O, God, You made them all in wisdom

The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis celebrates the breadth of diversity within the Jewish people, as among all humanity. Delighting in the myriad ways that human beings are created in God's image, we encourage the greatest spirit of openness in our communities, that we might be blessed through the unique holiness of all who enter. The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis is therefore concerned about ongoing discrimination against transgender people. We live in quickly changing times, our awareness often lagging behind our sincerely held values of inclusion and acceptance. Those whose innermost gender identity does not correspond to their biological gender have always been part of the Jewish people and of our communities. Until recently, however, most transgender Jews have remained hidden, unable to participate fully in Jewish religious and social life. With growing awareness of the gender/sexuality spectrum, our communities are becoming more open to transgender individuals. Grateful for the increased openness we witness today, the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis is committed to the full inclusion of transgender Jews.

For most of us, the gender of our bodies reflects the gender of our psychological and emotional make up. In this way, we are complete, whole, *shalem*. Our identities include gendered pieces that fit together to form a person who is able to live within the overall norms of our gendered society. However, for some of us, the gender of our bodies does not correspond to the gender we experience psychologically and emotionally. The dissonance in the transgender person between internal and external gender identity is called *gender dysphoria*. The dissonance experienced by others between who the transgender person appears to be and how they see and express themselves is at the source of the deep-seated prejudice that transgender people face.

A person's gender identity is an essential part of who they are as full human beings. Because people are generally identified in legal, social, and religious contexts according to their biological gender, transgender people confront unique barriers in being and becoming who they are meant to be, unable to live in the fullness of God's name *Ehyeh/I Shall Be*. Rising from fear and misunderstanding, as so often in our inability to see another simply as a human being, negative attitudes, called *transphobia*, too often give rise to negative behavior that endangers transgender people.

At home, a child may experience parental rejection, punishment, isolation, and/or coercion. In school, the transgender child may face name-calling, bullying, institutional punishment, and social isolation.

Transgender adults may experience the same harassment, as well as thinly veiled job and housing discrimination, delayed or denied medical care, as well as social and communal rejection. Fear and lack of understanding create such obstacles to the civil rights we believe are due every individual in our society.

Because of discrimination, transgender people often live on the social and economic periphery. At the same time, many transgender individuals also quietly live and contribute at every level of society. They may be doctors, social workers, parents, athletes, factory workers, and rabbis, rising each morning to put on the clothes and practiced behaviors necessary for them to function in the world, even as they hide the fullness of their identity.

Transgender Experience in a Jewish Context

The presence of transgender people is not new; of the diverse ways that humans are created in God's image there exists also a diversity of gender. As evidenced by the discussions in the Talmud and later halachic literature of the *androgynous* (person with male and female organs) and *tumtum* (person born with a

membrane covering the genitals, thus of indeterminate sex), Jewish leaders have long recognized the presence of individuals with differing sexual anatomies in their communities. The Rabbis pondered where such transgender individuals belonged in relationship to gender-specific mitzvot. They did not ponder, however, whether the *androgynous* and *tumtum* were, by virtue of their divergent anatomies, outside the borders of our covenant. Transgender persons are and always have been part of us. Extrapolating from a rabbinic *midrash* that the first human was created androgynous, there are indeed elements of both female and male within each of us. Today we know that the splendid diversity of gender expression reaches far beyond the anatomical to social, psychological and even spiritual levels of existence.

With a blessing said upon seeing diverse reflections of God's image, we affirm the "dignity of difference" (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks).

Baruch Atah Adonai, eloheynu melech ha'olam, m'shaneh ha'bri'yot. Blessed are You, God our God, Who makes all creatures different.

Unfortunately, widespread prejudice and ignorance often cause transgender Jews to feel alienated and to absent themselves from Jewish community. For a transgender individual, a synagogue community can be yet another place of hiding and marginalization. Socially, transgender persons may feel stigmatized. Congregants may feel confused. Sometimes this confusion catalyzes inappropriately intimate questions concerning the transgender person's life decisions, surgeries or anatomy. In a synagogue community, there may be discomfort all around. Consider the experience of entering a multi-stalled restroom, a place that safeguards modesty and privacy. The transgender person may confront surprise or disapproval, while other congregants may feel fear or anger.

In the spiritual home where they should feel safe and accepted, transgender people often encounter more of the hostility and rejection that they find outside the temple walls. We call on our congregations and communal organizations to

remove all barriers to full inclusion, heeding the words of Isaiah, “you shall be safe from oppression and shall have no fear” (54:14).

The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis affirms our Jewish communal responsibility to work for the full inclusion of transgender individuals in our Jewish communities and in American society.

Toward that end, we call on the Jewish community to:

- Encourage our Massachusetts legislators to support House Bill #1577 and Senate Bill #735, which would prohibit discrimination in public accommodations on the ground of gender identity.
- Encourage their congregations and organizations to review and implement policies that are trans friendly (for suggestions, please see “Making Your Jewish Community Trans-Friendly” in resources below)
- Provide educational programming to increase congregational understanding of transgender issues

Finally, we encourage our members to increase their awareness of transgender issues for use in pastoral settings.

We recommend the following resources for information and action suggestions concerning transgender individuals and their full inclusion:

www.keshetonline.org
www.transtorah.org
www.camparanutiq.org
www.transequality.org
www.colage.org
www.masstpc.org

The following copyrighted material is from ©TransTorah, “Making Your Jewish Community Trans-Friendly”

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

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.

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). 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.