

Dear Chavraya,

Today is Transgender Day of Remembrance. And there is so much happening in the world around us and within us. I had wanted to write two separate letters this week, one an expression of support and embrace of those among us who are transgender and one to address the pain, the fear, and the horror experienced during the past week. As time turns and Shabbos thankfully beckons, diverse strands of thought merge into one weave of emotion. In the end it is all about people, about human beings created in the image of God. It is what so many forget in encountering, or even worse, in imagining an encounter with transgender people. That we are all human beings is what so many forget in rushing to close hearts and doors to Syrian refugees. That we are all human beings is what is utterly lost on terrorists for whom humanity does not exist beyond the evil edge of their own narrow place.

The word *makom/place* appears in some form eleven times in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayetze*. Ya'akov goes out and we are told, *vayifga ba'makom/he encountered the place*. *Makom* can refer to physical place, or to inner space, and it is one of the names by which we call God, the one Who is everywhere, present in every place. The challenge is to recognize the holiness of every place, and in every person to recognize the face of God. Only when we can recognize God within ourselves and in the other, can we find wholeness. The Karliner Rebbe teaches that the great danger is *that one's heart not be divided against God/she'lo'yihiyeh chaluq al Ma'Makom*.

To be whole with God, one needs to be whole with oneself and with others. For transgender people it means to recognize one's own worth and value, one's own beauty as a reflection of God's holy image in its myriad ways of expression, one's own place in God's grand design, not to be divided from oneself or from God. As we say that, we realize that this of course is the way of human affirmation that is essential for every person to know. Only then can we appreciate that every other person also has a place that is their own and a right to fill the place that is theirs upon this earth. Each one has a right to be who they are in the embrace of all Place.

When Jacob awakes from his dream, he says, *Truly God is in this Place! And I, I did not know it!* And then he says, *Ma norah Ha'Makom ha'zeh/how awesome is this Place!* Each one of us is a place within which God dwells, each one a place of God that is truly awesome. Affirming our own and each other's presence in God's embrace, may we embrace each other and find comfort.

Please find below, and attached with action items, the Statement on Transgender Inclusion of the Mass Board of Rabbis, shared earlier, brought forward now on this Transgender Day of Remembrance.

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 *Ehiyeh/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.