



## Making Jewish Ritual Spaces All-Gender Inclusive

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### ***Introduction:***

While the past few years have seen increased awareness of issues facing the trans community, much of the work has focused on *binary* trans identities. Even within Jewish communities that deeply hold the value of inclusivity for all Jews, regardless of gender, there is still a lot of work to be done to create spaces that can be truly welcoming and empowering for trans/non-binary/gender non-conforming/genderfluid/genderqueer Jews. Some of these issues are directly related to access (e.g. providing gender-inclusive bathrooms, using non-gendered language on forms, etc.), while others directly relate to the gendered nature of Hebrew grammar. We recognize that we are working within an imperfect system -- mainstream American culture is binary and Jewish tradition is often gendered. As rabbis and Reconstructionists, we often see our role as working consistently and diligently within these systems to improve them for all people.

As Reconstructionist Jews, we are often at the forefront of social change in the Jewish community. In 2017, our movement passed a trans-inclusion resolution and our hope is that this guide will provide some of the education needed to bring the aspirations of that resolution into action. This is a living document reflecting the language and issues of our current moment. Our hope is that, as our language evolves and our understanding of gender expands, we will continue to add to and revise this document so that it reflects future understandings and information about this issue.

We believe that trans and non-binary accessibility can be approached from a “נעשה ונשמע” (*na’aseh v’nishma* -we will do and we will learn) perspective: bathrooms can be made accessible before the whole community receives in-depth education on trans issues; *gabba'im* (those responsible for calling people up to the Torah) should use people’s proper gender pronouns even though they might trip over the language the first time. Teaching about gender inclusivity requires modeling inclusivity in the belief that our actions will enable people to envision the world we want to create and then act accordingly. Learning about and teaching towards inclusivity should become an integrated part of the community’s education for all age levels.





## Practical Access Issues

- 1. Language.** In Jewish tradition, words and language are fundamental: God speaks the world into creation, Adam names the animals in the Garden of Eden, the Chatam Sofer writes that when we say, “Shabbat Shalom,” we create Shabbat around us. Within Judaism, we understand that speech is powerful and can welcome or wound depending on its use.

As do all members of marginalized communities, queer Jews become de facto educators about their own identities. The responsibility is on cisgender people to practice this language and become comfortable and fluent in it, lightening the load and showing a commitment to creating queer-friendly spaces. We understand that language is fluid, changing, regional, and imperfect. It is impossible to create a permanent definitive lexicon (which will eventually become outdated), but here are some important key terms in our current moment:

- **Cisgender:** A person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.
- **Cis-normative:** The social, cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that privilege cisgender experience and identity as the natural, normal gender identity.
- **Gender non-conforming:** A term used by people whose gender expression is different from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity. Just because someone is gender non-conforming does not mean that they are trans.
- **Genderqueer:** A term used by people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the categories of female and male, and/or women and men.
- **Gender binary:** the concept that the only genders are “man” and “woman.”
- **Gender identity:** A person’s inner understanding of the gender(s) to which they belong or with which they identify. This is each person’s unique and fundamental knowing or feeling, and is separate from a person’s physical body or appearance (although often related).
- **Gender transition:** A change in gender identity. Transition can include some or all of the following personal, medical, and legal steps: telling one's family, friends, and co-workers; using a different name and new pronouns; dressing differently; changing one's name and/or sex on legal documents; hormone therapy; and possibly (though not always) one or more types of surgery. The exact inward and outward expressions of transition vary from person to person. There is no correct order or flow for these choices, and a person may later return to gender





expressions or identities they previously held. One's gender transition may always be in motion or may feel completed at some point.

- **Mx.:** Used in addition to Mr., Mrs., Miss, and Ms. as a gender neutral/inclusive term (i.e. Mx. Smith.) Pronounced "mix".
- **Names:** Many people's legal documentation may retain the name given to them at birth. The ease, cost and procedure of changing one's name differs by circumstance. In all cases, it is appropriate to use the name a person provides, even if it differs from what we think it is or what appears on a document.
- **Non-binary:** A gender identity that specifically rejects the notion of binary gender (the idea that the only genders are "man" and "woman.") Can sometimes be used interchangeably with genderqueer.
- **Queer:** An umbrella term used by some to describe variations of gender identity and sexual orientation (e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, etc.).
- **Sex/DAB (designated at birth):** A person's biological sex as designated at birth, (male, female, or intersex), generally based upon primary and secondary sex characteristics.
- **Pronouns:** An important way to respect people is to refer to them by the pronouns *they themselves* use, rather than assuming a particular pronoun. Some examples of pronouns include he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/them/theirs. The term "preferred pronouns" is best avoided because pronouns are not a preference, but represent a fundamental aspect of a person's sense of self. A good term is "pronoun you use."
- **Transgender/trans/trans\*:** An umbrella term for anyone who knows themselves to be a gender that is different from the gender they were assigned at birth. Some transgender people modify their bodies through medical means, and some do not.
  - Just as we do not ask cisgender people about their genitals/bodies, it is not appropriate to ask trans people about their bodies, or any surgery or body modification they may, or may not have had.
  - Some people self-identity as transsexual, but this is generally an outdated term considered offensive or derogatory.
  - trans\* has been used to indicate a variety of trans identities. As of this publication, it is becoming an outdated usage.
- **Transphobia:** Irrational fear or hatred of people who break or blur gender roles and sex characteristics. Transphobia can manifest through misgendering someone, refusing to use the correct pronouns, not providing proper facilities, or acts of physical violence.

2. **Facilities.** A variety of bathroom facilities should be available in convenient locations for all building visitors. This should include single-stall or all-gender bathrooms, and should include bathrooms that are physically accessible and follow ADA guidelines.





As you are working to ensure that your building is accessible in a variety of ways, consider these questions:

- Are there adequate facilities for the trans/non-binary people in our community to use while in our space?
- If we rent space from another organization, are we allowed to make one of the bathrooms all-gender?
- How can we mark the bathroom to make clear that its primary purpose is for people without other options (i.e. gendered restrooms)?
- Does the all-gender bathroom also have the safety information posted that we put in all bathrooms (e.g. domestic violence hotlines, etc.)?
- If we have safety information around the building, does it include queer/trans-inclusive information (e.g. HIV information, suicide prevention hotlines, etc.)?
- Are the bathrooms designated for trans/non-binary people also ADA accessible?

3. **Forms/Identifying Information:** the language used on forms tells potential/current members about the values of an organization. Some questions to consider:

- Do our membership/Hebrew School/event forms have inclusive language (e.g.: “parent 1,” “caregiver 1,” “guardian 1,” etc.)?
- Does this form need a gender/sex question?
  - If yes, give trans-inclusive options or leave a “fill in the blank” space.
- When a new person comes into our space, how do we best greet them and learn about them without asking invasive questions?
  - Avoid “hello sir/ma’am;” instead, lead with a friendly “hello/Shabbat Shalom/welcome,” “Hello, my name is...” Inclusivity may not feature asking about pronouns, but rather actively showing that a space is a safe place for the use of non-binary pronouns. By normalizing sharing pronouns we give the opportunity for people to identify themselves in a way that is comfortable. This also makes space for people who are exploring different pronouns to use them naturally.
- If our synagogue has name tags that greeters or board members wear, can we encourage leadership to utilize pronoun stickers?
  - For some people who are exploring gender identity, asking their pronouns can be jarring. Instead, we make our space welcome in a way so that, if someone uses non-binary pronouns, they know they will be respected.
  - In general, saying hello, offering one’s own name and welcoming someone is a better approach than a barrage of questions. Waiting for someone to offer information and request specific information is always better than making incorrect or jarring assumptions.





4. **Continuing Education.** Transphobia often stems from lack of education. As we work to make spaces inclusive, some questions to consider:
- When was our last inclusivity training? Who attended? Was it done by a queer educator who could bring in their personal experience or by a straight and/or cisgender educator? How did that impact what we learned? What values did that choice illustrate?
    - Have we brought in a trans or non-binary educator and paid them to teach us?
    - Have we brought in educators on this topic on days that aren't Pride-themed (e.g. Pride Shabbat, etc.)? Is our calendar of programs aware of Trans Day of Remembrance and Trans Day of Visibility? (see notes below for resources on these days)
  - Does the rabbi/educator/etc. have resources available to them when questions arise? Do we have specifically *Jewish* queer resources/texts, both classic and modern available?
  - Who is in our community? What are their needs and are they being met?
    - This is a sensitive balancing act between consulting LGBTQ members and also not tokenizing them.
  - Is the information/resources we have on trans/non-binary accessibility up-to-date? Have we continued to learn as gender theory has evolved?
    - Do we have a team that is continually keeping track of these topics and ensuring that our community is up-to-date?

## Ritual Access Issues

1. **Kibudim L'Torah (Torah service honors).** One way we create inclusive spaces is having language that respects gender diversity. Many communities are working on their own ways of maintaining the Hebrew language while also maintaining *kavod habriyot* (human dignity). Acknowledging that Hebrew is a grammatically gendered language gives us the opportunity to be innovative. Here are some gender-inclusive ways to call people up for Torah honors. Some communities may decide to use gender-inclusive language for everyone, and some communities may ask individuals receiving honors what language best fits their identities.





For an aliyah:

נא לעמוד / אקרא לעמוד _____ מבית / ממנשפחה _____ ... לע ליה השלישית. ... לע ליה האחרונה. ... לקריאת ההפטרות.
<i>Na la'amod / Ekra la'amod _____ mibeit / mimishpacha _____</i> <i>...la'aliyah ha'shlishet.</i> <i>...la'aliyah ha'achronah</i> <i>...likriat ha'haftarah</i>
Please stand / I call to stand _____ from the house/family of _____ ... for the third aliyah. ...for the last aliyah. ...to read haftarah.

For Hagbah or Glilah:

נא לעמוד / אקרא לעמוד _____ מבית / ממנשפחה _____ ... לע הגבהת התורה ... לע גלילת התורה.
<i>Na la'amod / Ekra la'amod _____ mibeit /mimishpacha _____</i> <i>...l'hagbahat ha'Torah</i> <i>...l'glilat ha'Torah</i>
Please stand / I call to stand _____ from the house/family of _____ ...for the Torah raising. ... for the Torah wrapping.

In place of gendering the verb “to stand” in Hebrew, we can either say “please stand” (the infinitive is genderless), or “I call to stand” (the first person future is genderless). Instead of calling the person “ha’shlishi/t”, we refer only to the aliyah itself (“aliyah hashlishi”).

## 2. Ritual ceremonies

**a. Bar/Bat Mitzvah:** While there is no “set” way to create a gender-inclusive b’nai mitzvah ceremony, here are some ideas for the ceremony name and aliyah:

- i. נא לעמוד \_\_\_\_\_ מבית \_\_\_\_\_ (ו) לקבל עול המצוות  
*Na laamod \_\_\_\_\_ mibeit \_\_\_\_\_ (v' \_\_\_\_\_) l'kabel ol hamitzvot.*



(Stand \_\_\_\_\_, from the house of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ to accept the yoke of mitzvot)

- ii. Ceremony name ideas: “b’nai mitzvah” make sense from a English perspective (b’nai = fits with the english “they”). Another option is “b’notei,” which combines the masculine and feminine Hebrew suffixes to create a mixed gender word. “B-mitzvah,” “kabalat mitzvah,” “simchat mitzvah,” or “tekes mitzvah” are also options.

**b. Weddings:** There are many options to call partners in a marriage ceremony. Here are some ideas that encompass gender diversity:

- i. *Reyim* (beloved)
- ii. *Reyimot*, combines gendered suffixes to create a mixed gender word
- iii. *Reyim ahuvot* (loving companions) switches the suffixes to mix gender linguistically

**c. Mi Shabeirach:** This is an option from the Fort Tryon Jewish Center for a gender inclusive general *mi shabeirach*:

<p>May the One who blessed our ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless _____ from the house of _____ for the honor of this aliyah, for the honor of the Divine, for the honor of the Torah, and in honor of Shabbat, and _____, and all their family, and this holy community community. Many the Holy Blessed One protect and deliver them from all trouble and distress, from all afflictions and illness. May God send blessing and success to all their endeavors and to the Jewish people and let us say, Amein.</p>	<p><i>Mi shabeirach avoteinu v'imoteinu, Avraham, Yitzchak, va'Yaakov, Sarah, Rikva, Rachel v'Leah, hu ye'varech et _____ mibeit _____ ba'avor ha'aliyah lichvod hamakom, lichvod haTorah, ve'lichvod haShabbat, v'et _____, v'et kol hamishpacha, v'et kol hakahal hakadosh hazeh. Bis'char zeh, hakadosh baruch hu yishmoreim ve'yatzileim mikol tzarah ve'tzukah, u'mikol negah u'machalah, ve'yishlach bracha b'chol ma'seh yedeihem, im kol yisrael, v'nomar: amein.</i></p>	<p>מי שברך אבותינו ואמותינו אברהם יצחק ויעקב, שרה רבקה רחל ולאה, הוא יברך את _____ [מ בית] _____ בעבור העלייה לכבוד המקום, לכבוד התורה, ולכבוד השבת, ואת ... _____ ואת כל המשפחה ואת כל הקהל הקדוש הזה. בשכר זה, הקדוש ברוך הוא ישמרם ויצילם מכל צרה וצוקה, ומכל נגע ומחלה, וישלח ברכה והצלחה בכל מעשה ידיהם עם כל ישראל, ונאמר אמן.</p>
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**3. Hevra Kedisha:** One goal of *hevra kedisha* is to preserve the dignity of the deceased person during *tahara* (ritual washing), which historically has meant having a men’s group and a women’s group. As we seek to preserve the dignity of people of all genders, some questions that arise are: How do we show *kavod hameit* to a trans or non-binary individual? How do we welcome trans and non-binary community members into *hevra*



*kedisha*? How do we affirm a trans or non-binary person's gender expression while preparing them for burial?

- a. A model: Congregation Bet Haverim in Atlanta
  - i. Bet Haverim is in the process of creating a *hevra kedisha* that is trans and non-binary inclusive. They hope that when they perform that mitzvah of *tahara*, the congregation knows enough about their identity to assemble a group that preserves the dignity of the deceased. The congregation is exploring ways to be inclusive that welcomes trans and non-binary community members who want to be part of *hevra kedisha*, a system that is generally binary. Bet Haverim has two binary groups for members to choose from or, if a member is trans or non-binary, they are exploring if they can opt to be in both groups. When the *hevra kedisha* buries a person whose gender expression includes modifying their daily physical appearance in some way (e.g. a chest binder, breast cups, etc.), they can be buried with those items, if they believe that honors the person's wishes.

#### 4. Misc.

- a. Trans and non-binary specific rituals: We have the blueprint of Jewish tradition to create rituals for people who haven't had space in our communities before. Here are some days and rituals that we can think about including in our communal learning and tradition:
  - i. Trans Day of Remembrance (November 20)
    1. <https://www.hrc.org/campaigns/transgender-day-remembrance>
    2. <https://tdor.info/>
  - ii. Trans Day of Visibility (March 31)
    1. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/international-transgender-day-of-visibility>
  - iii. National Coming Out Day (October 11)
  - iv. LGBTQ Pride Month (June)
  - v. Birkat Gomel and other blessings following surgeries
  - vi. Mikveh rituals marking transitional periods.
  - vii. Name changing ceremonies. Several good examples can be found at [www.ritualwell.org](http://www.ritualwell.org)

A note about allyship: We hope to build a community of inclusivity and allyship, which is more focused on our actions than what we say about those actions. Good allyship is rooted in humility and good listening to marginalized individuals in our community. Inclusion is not about "us" including "them;" inclusion means that we are all equal members of the community. This means that if any one member of our community is not feeling included, then we are not inclusive. This document furthers the goal of inclusion and equity in our community and gives concrete steps to achieving that.







## Online Resources:

Keshet: <https://www.keshetonline.org>

TransTorah: <http://www.transtorah.org>

RitualWell: <https://www.ritualwell.org>

## Further Reading:

- “Resolution Affirms Full Inclusion of Transgender, Non-Binary Jews”. *Reconstructing Judaism*, March 27, 2017. <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/news/statement-support-transgender-non-binary-inclusion>
- “Come to the Bimah and Read from the Torah! But first, what’s your preferred gender pronoun?” *Tablet Magazine*, July 12, 2017. <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/240492/come-to-the-bimah-and-read-from-the-torah-but-first-whats-your-preferred-gender-pronoun>
- “Beyond he and she: New expressions of gender arrive in the rabbinate.” *The Jewish News of Northern California*, June 7, 2017.
- <https://www.jweekly.com/2017/06/07/beyond-he-and-she-new-expressions-of-gender-in-the-rabbinate/>
- “What It Means To Call Ourselves Non-Binary: An Autostraddle Roundtable”. *Autostraddle*, December 28, 2017. <https://www.autostraddle.com/what-it-means-to-call-ourselves-non-binary-an-autostraddle-roundtable-377060/>
- S Bear Bergman on Transgender Day of Visibility: [https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/\\_blog/The\\_ProsePeople/post/international-transgender-day-of-visibility-jewish-perspective/](https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/_blog/The_ProsePeople/post/international-transgender-day-of-visibility-jewish-perspective/)
- Keshet’s lexicon guide: <https://www.keshetonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/LGBTQ-Terminology-Sept2017.pdf>
- Refinery 29’s Gender Dictionary: <http://www.refinery29.com/lgbtq-definitions-gender-sexuality-terms/>
- Keshet’s Inclusion Guide for Synagogues: [https://www.keshetonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Keshet-Synagogue-Inclusion-Guide-3\\_updated050317.pdf](https://www.keshetonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Keshet-Synagogue-Inclusion-Guide-3_updated050317.pdf)

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