

Religion, Culture and Gender Guides



The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and to provide creative and critically informed resources on this theme.



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TRANSGENDER STRUGGLE IN A YESHIVAH

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INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of this guide is to bring to light challenges faced by Jewish transgender students studying at Yeshivas. The information provided is aimed at Rabbi's and other staff within Yeshivah colleges to help them be aware and provide adequate care and support for students who may have undergone or will undergo transsexual change.

The case study of David Aaronson I have created will be used to highlight the struggles for which a male Jew in a Yeshivah faces whilst considering/transitioning. The impact of androcentricity, socially constructed gender and the concept of masculinity will be analysed regarding David Aaronson's case.

The reidentification of genders in a mixture of Jewish literature will be stressed as a point of reference for Rabbis and Yeshivah staff to identify the variety of non-binary genders acknowledged by the religion. To encourage Jewish persons to accept and not reject persons deviating from the gender binary of male and female.

A brief mention of the UK National Equality Legislation will specify that persons of all genders are under the legal protection of this policy. As well as, the obligations expected of educators to cater correctly for protected persons.

A glossary of terminology highlighted in red can be found at the end.

CASE STUDY:

Born in a British Jewish family, David Aaronson never felt comfortable in his own skin. Brought up being taught that G-d created people in the binary of male and female, he struggled with the accepting that it was G-d's will for him to be born male. From being taught that it is a sin for a man to wear women's clothing (Deuteronomy 22:5), David was fearful of trying to express himself without sinning further. And yet once David realised that transitioning would allow them to reach their identity it would stop them from lying (which is another sin from the Hebrew Bible) to their family, friends and Jewish community. The challenge then faced is not just whether the Jewish community would accept David's new-found identity but also whether they would be allowed to continue studying at the Yeshivah they have been attending. It's important for David to have peace with themselves, in their own skin but also to maintain their Jewish faith and life in the community.

FURTHER EXAMPLES OF TRANS-JEWS

The above scenario is not in isolation as a current challenge but is part of a plethora found throughout history. The struggle of Qalonymos ben Qalonymos with his male identity had been explicitly expressed in his work: *Even boban* (meaning touchstone). 'If only you [G-d] would turn me from male to female!'- Qalonymos in this statement was hoping that G-d, who can do miracles, would be able to perform another transformative miracle (like those in the Hebrew Bible) and transform his physiological sex to match his internal want to be female. Tova Rosen recognizes that this was an unconcealed exclamation of a transsexual desire. {Rosen, 2011}

Similarly, a more recent challenge was faced and overcome by Joy Ladin – who transitioned whilst teaching in a Yeshivah in the States to a trans-female. Adversity from the Yeshivah and Joy's colleagues whilst she underwent the transition; increased further when she tried to return to her teaching post. Only after going to court, with support from local governance Joy could start back teaching – respected as any other female staff member in the Yeshivah {Ladin, 2010}. 'It's the

hardest thing I've ever done, choosing life.' {Ladin, 2008} Her case shows pioneering courage through pain, as well as the opportunity to continue life as a Jew after having transitioned.

GENDER THEORIES

There are many gender theories that exist that are applicable to the case study of David Aaronson.

The first being biological essentialism which has been the historical gender labeller in Judaism, which follows the parameters of Genesis 1. Biological essentialism centred on the function of reproduction.

Secondly, David Aaronson suffered from the pressures of the Jewish androcentric gender lenses.

Where Jewish men are superior to that of Jewish women, often being treated as second class citizens. This is reinstated by the morning prayer/blessing ending "Blessed are you O God, King of the Universe, Who has not made me a gentile/ slave/ woman" found in the Siddur. To be born male is thought to be a big blessing. To want to deviate from this position is looked down upon as it goes against this traditional hierarchy.

Finally, the pressure to fulfil socially constructed gender roles, amplified the anxiety of the individual. As the practices and actions of 'The Jewish Man' are idolised to such a high degree that male persons are scrutinised and sometimes ostracised for not embodying these expectations wholly. To be a male Jew is something that one must constantly be working on maintaining.

Defining Masculinity

Satlow identifies that Rabbinic constructions of masculinity hold that fact that a penis made a person male. Two other qualities followed this physiological characteristic and those are self-restraint (which women lack) and Torah study that can only be done by one who has the innate ability of self-restraint {Satlow, 1996}. This activity is socially constructed to be for men only.

A Jewish man is not just born but is signified by circumcision, they are made through cultural

transformation. Masculinity is not innate however is attained through practice and rituals and therefore must be continually maintained as a status through socially accepted behaviour.

If masculinity is created from its attainment and maintenance, then it would be seen that not only those born biologically but choosing to be masculine in practice (transgender-males) can achieve male status. Allowing the identified male persons to participate in ritual practice and study in Yeshivahs.

GENDER IN JEWISH LITERATURE (TALMUD, MIDRASH)

As those familiar with authoritative Jewish literature will be aware that four other genders are identified besides the male - female binary. **Saris, Ay'lonit, Androgynous** and **Tumtum** are the names of those recognized genders.

The acknowledgement and flexibility Jewish literature has for gender was strides ahead historically than contemporary secular society. However today this fact does not seem to be evident in practice.

Modern Jews and Rabbis should be aware and welcoming to those who do not identify themselves within the gender binary.

NATIONAL EQUALITY ACT LEGISLATION 2010

Chapter 15, part 2, chapter 1, section 7 explains that persons undergoing gender reassignment are protected under this act: (1) A person has the protected characteristic of gender reassignment if the person is proposing to undergo, is undergoing or has undergone a process (or part of a process) for reassigning the person's sex by changing physiological or other attributes of sex {Act, 2010, c. 15}.

Further on in Chapter 15 Part 6 Chapter 2 Section 91 clarifies that any education institution is not allowed to discriminate against a [protected] person by the means of (1a) deciding who is admitted as a student; (1b) the conditions of offering a place to the student; (1c) by not admitting the student. These legislations were made to prevent the victimisation of any protected persons -including those transitioning. And are applicable to all education systems in the UK, including academies for age range of 16-19 years [s91, 10 (D)]; and any institution within the further education sector {Act, 2010, c. 15}.

It is therefore the duty of educators -in this case Rabbis to acknowledge this as Legislation for the UK, relevant to Yeshivahs. Rejection of present students transitioning, or even as an applicant that is transitioning, would be discriminatory.

SUMMARY

As modelled in the case study gender suppression for many Jews causes anxiety and is a struggle for them to face as it can contrast to the teachings of their faith and their religious community.

Gender suppression is an abuse of the system caused through what I call binarycentrism.

Steps to integrate transsexual students or students transitioning and support them are necessary for the Jewish faith to thrive. As mentioned rejection (or expulsion) of such students would be a discriminatory action if based upon their gender.

Men in Jewish tradition hold the authority and power, for change to happen it must be initiated by them. That is why Connell recognizes that men are the gate keepers to societal change and are the gatekeepers for gender equality (Connell, 2005).

It has been found that around 50% of youths have had suicidal thoughts and notions leading to and during their transition, 50-54% have encountered bullying and discrimination at school, with 63-% have faced physical abuse (Haas & Herman, 2014}. It is for the benefit of the individual, community and Yeshivah that steps to integrate trans-persons are taken. It is down to Rabbis and other male leaders to start this progression.

GLOSSARY

- **Androcentric** – Focused on or centred around men.
- **Androgynous** – A person whom has physical characteristics that are both male and female.
- **Ay'lonit** – A person born female who then develops masculine features and infertility during puberty.
- **Midrash** - An ancient commentary on part of the Hebrew scriptures, attached to the biblical text.
- **Rabbi** – A Jewish teacher or scholar who studies or teaches the Jewish Law.
- **Saris** – A male person that develops feminine characteristics in puberty.
- **Siddur** – The Jewish prayer book.
- **Talmud** - The Jewish compilations which embody the Mishnah, or oral teaching of the Jews, and the Gemara, or collection of discussions on the Mishnah.
- **Transgender**- Relating to a person whose sense of identity and gender does not match their sex at birth.
- **Tumtum** – A person of undeterminable gender, who's genitals are hidden or undeveloped.
- **Yeshivah** – Institute for Jewish Talmudic learning.

Connell, R. W. (2005). Change among the Gatekeepers: Men, Masculinities, and Gender Equality in the Global Arena. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30(3), 1801-1825.

-An easy read, clear formatted exploring men and Man, the symbol and the agents.

Masculinity as a socially constructed behaviour and the limitations of traditional mentality which may limit gender equality. It emphasises that men have the power, influence and opportunity to truly endorse gender equality. Analysis of the struggle for some men to give up power is mentioned. However little mention is made of any historical progress instigated by men thus far.

Haas, A. P., Herman, J. L., 2014, Suicide attempts among transgender and gender non-conforming adults, 2.

-Very informative and raises awareness of the different levels at which trans-persons struggle and are abused. Further light is given to the quality of life, stressors and other factors to suicidal attempts include, but are not limited to: gender, disability, HIV. The quantitative data is well portrayed and analysed. The researchers are explicitly aware that further research is needed.

Ladin, J. (2010). A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Stern College: Gender Transition and Jewish Ethics.(QUEER SPIRITUALITY AND POLITICS)(Essay). *Tikkun*, 25(4), 50.

- A short informal magazine piece describing Joy's transition while teaching at Stern college in 2007-8. A mention of the reactions from the Conservative Orthodox presence at the Yeshiva college were discussed to be hurtful to her personally. She concludes by raising

questions how people, trans-people can be their truest self and develop good moral relationships. It provides a bias, but relaxed insight into her personal journey.

Rosen, Tova, 2003, *Circumcised Cinderella:: Jewish Gender Trouble*, 168.

- A historical literature analysis at transgender desires focusing on Qalonymos personal struggle through his literature. It breaks down and explains his struggle in light of Jewish tradition and masculine expectations. A brief mention of a female writer who similarly struggled is mentioned. However the challenge of interpreting Gods' will is brought to light which further raises the challenge of interpreting revelation and scripture- who's agenda is prioritizing the interpretation?

Satlow, M. (1996). TRY TO BE A MAN - THE RABBINIC CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY. *Harv. Theol. Rev.*, 89(1), 19-40.

-Informative and very detailed. Looks at the Rabbinic and social construction of masculinity in Judaism. Examples of a mans defining mental characteristic of self-restraint applied to everyday situations are well placed. Highlighting why women in contrast are inferior to men. Yet man can potentially lose his male standing by not fulfilling the social/scriptural norms.

UK Equality Legislation 2010,; HMRC Gov, Chapter 15, part 2, chapter 1, section 7; Chapter 15 Part 6 Chapter 2 Section 91

-Semi useful for referencing for professional use, however no practical advice is given on enacting the principles of non-discriminatory practice. Outlines all persons under protection, protection categories, as well as naming areas in the public sector to which different legislation is appropriate.