

The T in the Alphabet Soup: GLBTQ

Contributed by Rabbi Joshua Lesser

In a zealous desire to seem as inclusive as possible, when talking about what was once known as the gay and lesbian community, we have substituted what I call the "laundry list" or "alphabet soup"; GLBT/LGBT (sometimes with an added Q) has been the standard acronym for speaking about this community. G=Gay, L=Lesbian, B=Bisexual, T=Transgendered and Q=Queer or Questioning. We use this catchall but many of us don't even know what transgendered really means?

Even more importantly the use of the term GLBT community is misleading because it often implies that we have the same issues and concerns. Each community represented in the acronym has specific needs and circumstances. We are more of a coalition than one single community. This becomes most clear when looking at the needs of the transgendered community. Understanding the differences enables me to better support and learn from the transgendered community as a gay man.

Long before I had even heard the word transgendered, MTV brought it into my home with the advent of music videos. I remember being 13 years old watching the video to "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me" by Boy George. This singer with long braids, eye makeup and nothing to clearly identify his gender except the name "Boy" was a huge contrast to the rigidly gendered world of my Yeshivah High School education. I was instantly repulsed and excited by this person who was transgressing something so large it seemed unspeakable. And when in the video he was shown wearing a T-Shirt with the Hebrew words for Culture Club, the Hebrew letters suggested to me that this was something holy.

When I began to encounter the word transgendered in college; it was upon reading a book given to me by my sister, *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg that I felt like I understood what transgendered meant beyond any pat definition. For while many people define transgendered as the label for anyone who feels as if their inward gender does not match their outward gender, Leslie's life story, a Jew, underlies the poignant humanity in this individual's journey that deepens the basic definition. Hearing a life story always has the power to create understanding. Here was a person whose outward experience as a woman did not resemble her inner life.

When I worked on organizing the Stonewall 25 march in NYC, I met my first transgendered people. It was here where I encountered the laundry list because the name of the March was Stonewall 25: Celebrating Gay and Lesbian Liberation. The transgendered people wanted their name included. When looking at who was involved, it certainly seemed that in 1969 people were fighting together for the right just to be who they were, love whom they wanted and to represent themselves to the world however, they chose. And since there were people who would have been labeled as transgendered who were part of the rebellion, it made sense to include them in the title. It became a huge struggle, and it was during these lengthy arguments that I met Leslie Feinberg herself and four of five other transgendered people. Putting a face on the definition made it clear to me how this was a group like any other that

was misunderstood, and often ridiculed. Transgendered people also did not, nor do they still have a clear haven in the gay community.

We have different needs as communities, but still so many of the misunderstandings in both our communities are interrelated. For gay and lesbian people our primary legal concerns are around the areas of immigration, adoption, marriage, and employment. For transgendered people, while many of these areas apply, the issues are more fundamental like the ability to claim one's own gender on birth certificates and official documents and access to health care. Both communities though, share a parallel desire for safety and well-being. Transgendered issues scare people because they challenge the categories with which we are familiar (male and female) and challenge the relationship that we construct with gender and sexuality.

Erin Swenson, the minister at Ormewood Presbyterian Church remarked though despite some major differences in our communities that the gay and lesbian movement is essentially a transgender movement. For what we do in the bedroom is a private matter. The issue is how we choose to express ourselves to the outer world, which often is an expression of our gender. I believe this is the very place where we would benefit from a deeper understanding because at The Rainbow Center, despite sexual orientation, we are creating a spiritual home for people to just be—just be who they are in a variety of expressions of gender. It is when we examine our own relationship to our gender that we can really empathize with those who feel a schism between how they are perceived and who they are.