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Transgender Jews: Beyond the Rainbow

More and more, transgender Jews are introducing themselves to the Jewish world
by [Julie Gruenbaum Fax](#)



Mike/Michelle and Robin (Gurse) Dennis were sure love was a thing of the past, until they found each other. Photo by Lynn Pelkey

Deborah attends services at Temple Aliyah nearly every week, but on a Friday night two years ago, she was nervous. Her daughter, Rebecca, then 18 and known all of her life as Jeremy, had chosen the Kabbalat Shabbat service to come

out in public dressed as a woman for the first time. Deborah worried Rebecca's newfound confidence and courage might be shot down by disapproving stares.

Tall and thin, with a head of brown curls that were still short on that day so early in her transition, Rebecca wore a straight, white skirt and a top with large purple paisleys. She doesn't like to be showy, so she wore flats and no makeup.

When Deborah and Rebecca walked into the family service at the Woodland Hills Conservative synagogue, along with Rebecca's younger brother, they were greeted with friendly smiles, with Temple Aliyah's Rabbi Stewart Vogel in the lead.

Although for this article Rebecca asked that her last name not be used so that she can protect her future identity — she wants to be known just as a woman, not a transwoman — the family is very open at its synagogue and grateful for the support it has found there.

Like many other Jewish institutions, Temple Aliyah is increasingly coming face-to-face with a human issue that until just two or three years ago was mostly in the shadows. Transgender people — their stories and their rights — were often not discussed or openly welcomed. Even with the “T” expeditiously tacked onto the LGBT of gay and lesbian equality, transfolk didn't get much serious attention.

Increasingly, however, transgender acceptance and rights have entered the mainstream conversation. Bruce Jenner's revealing interview last week with Diane Sawyer gave a huge audience more insight and information than it has ever had about what it means to be transgender. Shows such as Amazon's award-winning and Jewish-centric “Transparent,” as well as significant storylines on “Glee” and “Orange Is the New Black,” have opened conversations in popular culture, moving the topic from a whisper and a snicker to “The Today Show.”

Likewise, transgender openness is increasingly a part of life at Jewish institutions, as members or children of members come out, or just as often, as shuls, schools and other organizations try to proactively determine how they will accommodate and embrace community members who are transgender.

“The willingness of the Jewish community to have this conversation in a nonpushback way is amazing,” said Asher Gellis, founder and director of JQ International, a Los Angeles-based programming and advocacy group for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) Jews. “Five years ago, I would send speakers to youth groups to tell their coming-out stories and to talk about bullying, and very often, in a very polite way, those groups were trying to push us away from the transgender conversation. Now, all they want is transgender speakers.”

This month alone, there are at least two significant trans events in the L.A. Jewish community. JQ, along with New York-based Eshel, is sponsoring “TransTorah: A Family Journey,” at The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles on May 3, part of the Jewish Wisdom and Wellness Conference sponsored by Cedars-Sinai and the Kalsman Institute of Hebrew Union College. On May 5, the Sandra Caplan Community Bet Din will hold a daylong conference for rabbis titled “In God's Image: Transgender Folk in the Conversion Process.”

Rabbi Denise Eger, senior rabbi at Congregation Kol Ami, a West Hollywood congregation founded to serve the LGBT community, said she has witnessed great — though incomplete — progress toward acceptance; she also said she has received a stream of calls from institutions and families looking for guidance.

Although more traditional circles still struggle with reconciling transgender lives with halachic observance, many Jewish communities embrace transgender people as created in the image of God. Equally, they know that their support can be pikuach nefesh — a matter of life and death — because transgender people have disproportionately high rates of suicide and of being victims of violence.

But even in liberal circles, the Jewish notion of a shandah, an embarrassment, lingers.

When Rebecca came to Temple Aliyah that first Friday night, an acquaintance sneered about how awful and embarrassed Deborah must feel.

Rebecca doesn't let comments like that one bother her because she knows she is being true to herself.

“Every single year for my birthday, for four or five years, I wished that I would turn physically female the day afterward,” Rebecca said in an interview in her home, her voice high and soft. Rebecca is now a student at CSUN, and she wants to become a teacher. “Now I feel a lot better than I used to feel, like I can be myself and express myself. I'm still not completely satisfied, but a lot more satisfied than I used to be — I'm not afraid to look at myself in the mirror.”

Vogel said Temple Aliyah has worked hard through sermons, education and programming to create a culture where everyone understands that everyone has a story — whether it involves sexual identity, disability, mental illness or maybe a difficult past.

“All along, we have talked about synagogue being a place for all Jews to find their spiritual haven, no matter what their story is,” Vogel said, noting Temple Aliyah has at least two other families with transgender members.

As a mother, Deborah said, the adjustment has been a long road. Although her immediate reaction was to offer love and support when she realized her son was serious about transitioning, it took Deborah a good year of talking and therapy and grappling before she fully came to terms with the idea. And she made some choices. For example, Deborah refused Rebecca's request to take down all the pictures of Jeremy in their house, but she did agree to move them to her bedroom.

Deborah said she still mourns the loss of Jeremy, and she also continues to worry about Rebecca. She worries that she will be assaulted on a bus or at school, or that other students will be unkind. She worries that Rebecca's internal struggle has only just begun, that it will require so much more bravery. She worries about who Rebecca will find to love, to share her life with.

But even with those worries, Deborah is amazed at the transformation she sees in Rebecca.

“She is much more comfortable and carries herself differently. She used to walk looking at the ground and didn't talk very much. She was very inward. And she's really blossomed into a very social person. ... And I think because she is more comfortable, she talks about herself in a much more positive way than she used to. If that is what being transgender does for a person, then I am all for it,” Deborah said.

For people who have never thought about whether their gender identity matches the body in which they were born, the idea that gender is not as clear cut as it seems can be hard to conceptualize.

“If you are not transgendered, I imagine that what I am about to say will sound fantastic — fantastic in the sense of strange and beyond comprehension — but for years, I would look in the mirror and be completely shocked at who I saw,” [Joshua Gershick](#), who began transitioning last November, at 55, said over coffee at a North Hollywood cafe. “I would look in GQ magazine, or see guys on the street, and think, ‘I look like that.’ And then I would look in the mirror and I would think, ‘Whoa!’ It was shocking. It's an interesting experience: You know who you are, you have a body of work, you have a position and a place in society, you love your life — and I do love my life — and you also have this profound disconnection between how people see you and how you internally feel and see yourself.”

For those who experience it, this is not new. The medical world since about 1980 has officially recognized gender dysphoria as a real condition — and the wide consensus among mental health and medical professionals is that it is best treated by some level of transitioning to the desired gender. But going much further back historically, there are some surprising approaches to the question of gender in Jewish legal discourse.

The Mishnah and Gemara recognize four genders that are neither male nor female, where people have various combinations of anatomy from both genders or neither, either by nature or by injury. The rabbis debated their status, but the very fact that they are acknowledged undermines the whole idea that there are only two choices, says Rachel Biale, a San Francisco-based author and activist.

Many Jewish ideas that seem starkly black or white have in-betweens, she pointed out. To meat or dairy, there is pareve. To innocent or guilty, there is an array of levels of culpability. There is holy and profane, and, in between, many levels of sanctity or purity.

“The most obvious binary distinction we have is with the mechitzah [dividing men and women in a synagogue], which doesn’t apply to people who are in between male and female. So does that mean we need a tri-chitzah, a three-sectioned synagogue? Or does it mean what we have to realize that the whole underpinning of the mechitzah is no longer relevant?” she asked.

To be sure, there are still many Jews who consider cross-dressing or surgically altering sexual anatomy a grave violation of Jewish law and values, particularly within traditional Jewish circles. Even among more progressive Jews, acceptance isn’t always forthcoming.

“I think in the larger Jewish community, there is a lack of awareness and a lack of understanding and a lack of compassion,” Kol Ami’s Eger said.

For the traditional Jew, so much of halachah assigns roles by gender, leaving the transgender person as all but an outsider. But the elimination of nearly all halachic and ritual distinctions between men and women in liberal Judaism minimizes the halachic ramifications of transitioning. If men and women count in a minyan, if men and women are obligated in all the mitzvot, what does it matter what gender they are or were, and whether that changes?

In 2006, a halachic treatise in the Conservative movement concluded that reassignment surgery in fact changes one’s halachic status from one gender to the other. Rabbi Len Sharzer, a professor of bioethics at the Jewish Theological Seminary who was a plastic surgeon before he became a rabbi, said he hopes to present a new halachic treatise, or teshuvah, by early 2016 that will expand that recognition to include transgender people who have not had surgery, as many opt not to have the highly invasive and imperfect procedures.

In the Conservative movement, Sharzer said, the only areas of Jewish law where gender makes a difference are in personal-status issues, such as marriage, divorce or conversion. His teshuvah will look, for example, at questions involving whether someone who has transitioned has to offer a get — divorce consent — to a prior spouse if that marriage dissolves. He wants to explore whether a reconstructed penis should or can have some sort of circumcision or drawing of blood traditional in a conversion. Or how to compassionately handle the same question for a transfemale who still has a penis.

The Orthodox world is less willing to take on such considerations or concessions. Rabbi Howard Jachter, an Orthodox bioethicist and a dayan (beit din — Jewish court of law — adjudicator) in New Jersey, said, “I have all the sympathy in the world for them, but it is an enormous tragedy for people to mutilate their bodies and to do this to themselves,” Jachter said. He said reassignment surgery is halachically forbidden, as is wearing the clothing of the opposite gender, a view shared by much of mainstream Orthodoxy.

Jachter said he has officiated at divorces in which the husband has transitioned, and that a get is still required, because in Orthodox Judaism, halachah does not recognize a person in their new gender.

But even in the Orthodox world, there are some signs of movement: Rabbi Zev Farber, a progressive Orthodox thinker based in Atlanta, has written an as-yet-unpublished article that offers some openings for allowing surgery and recognizing the person in his or her new gender.

He bases his argument on the idea that if halachah is forced to confront this issue for people who have physical, visible gender disorders, the laws should also show compassion for people whose gender dysphoria is internal but still real.

He believes the reaction to transgender people is coming from fear and misunderstanding — much as it did, and still does, for gays — but he said as Orthodox people, like the rest of the world, increasingly start coming out, the community will have to find a way to welcome them.

In fact, a few years ago, a student at the Modern Orthodox Shalhevet high school confided in head of school Rabbi Ari Segal that she was going to transition to male. The student had already decided to leave the school and move away from his halachically observant community. Segal offered concern for the child's welfare.

“Once you understand what someone is struggling with, I don't know that there is anything to do but have compassion and love, and to support that person. And I think he felt that,” Segal said. The student eventually did transition, and he and Segal remain in touch occasionally.

Segal said if a transgender student were to ask to stay in the school, he would have to consult with rabbis and do some research before making a decision as to how to respond.

“I would have to work through it the way I work through all issues — trying to have fealty to halachah, while being supersensitive to the person who is struggling,” he said.

But even in circles where openness to transgender Jews is unambiguous, things can get complicated.

Kadin Henningsen, 36, grew up as a Methodist girl in Nebraska but always envisioned himself as a Jewish man as an adult. He converted and transitioned in 2009 in Los Angeles.

“I think, for me, having a deeper relationship with the divine made my work in exploring my gender feel more safe, so I started exploring more and taking more risks and slowly coming out to people,” Henningsen said. “The more Jewish I felt, the more comfortable I became with my gender identity. The two sort of fed each other.”

But when Henningsen applied to rabbinical school at the Reform Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, he was rejected.

Elliot Kukla and Reuben Zellman were the first openly transgender rabbis ordained by the Reform movement, in 2006 and 2010, respectively, and the Reform movement has led the Jewish community in LGBT equality. Yet in a meeting after Henningsen was rejected, the committee told him, “We can't figure out if you want to be a transsexual rabbi, or a rabbi who happens to be transsexual,” Henningsen recalled.

In his application, Henningsen had used only the term transgender, so the committee's use of “transsexual” to him signified a lack of nuanced understanding. But more than that, Henningsen said, the rhetoric of “a rabbi who happens to be” was used concerning women 40 years ago, and gays 20 years ago, and has been discredited as a way of dishonoring the interconnected components of a person's identity.

When reached for comment, Rabbi Dvora Weisberg, HUC's rabbinic school director, said she is legally barred from discussing Henningsen's case, though she points to HUC's history of openness. But although Henningsen recognizes that HUC is not trans-phobic and has been supportive of trans students in many ways, he believes there may be lingering blind spots.

Henningsen decided instead to enroll in a master's program in gender studies at the University of Wisconsin, where he is writing a thesis on transgender issues and Jewish law, but he says rabbinic school is still a possible path. He is also a fellow at Svara: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva in Chicago.

Joel Kushner is director of the Institute for Judaism, Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity (IJSO) at HUC but was not part of Henningsen's acceptance decision; he suggested the case reveals how nuanced and complicated such decisions can be. Although gay and lesbian rabbinical school candidates, already familiar to admissions committees, might have the luxury of leaving their sexual orientation in the background, Kushner said, transgender people, like Henningsen, don't have that privilege, as their visibility in the mainstream community is so new. "Knowing Kadin, he has a fully integrated identity of his Jewishness and his trans-ness, and he lives that out every day in a full way. I think many people are not used to that, and it hits up against assumptions and potential prejudices that people do not realize they have," Kushner said.

Kushner suggested that even for the most welcoming, it is too soon for complacency when it comes to transgender acceptance in the Jewish community.

"We think we're further along than we are, and that's hard to face," Kushner said. "The majority of the Jewish community is at a tolerant place, not an inclusive place, and who wants to see themselves as just tolerant?"

Still, he points to many areas of progress. While the cross-denominational Sandra Caplan Community Bet Din (a Jewish legal court) in Los Angeles has not yet converted someone who is transgender, more than a year ago it changed its forms to make the pronouns more sensitive, and offered a more neutral option for Hebrew names along with ben or bat, "son of" or "daughter of": mi'beit, "from the house of." The beit din now allows the person converting to decide the gender of those who will witness the mikveh ritual.

On another front, Beit T'Shuvah, the rehabilitation community in Culver City, last year moved its first transgender resident from the male to the female residence, after consulting with Gellis at JQ.

Weizmann Day School in Pasadena created a safe environment for learning about the issue a few years ago when a first-grade boy wanted to come to school in a dress. Administrator Lori Snyder helped prep the other students. The kids had some questions: "If we think his dress is cool, can we tell him?" "Can we tell him we think he's brave?"

The child came to school in a new purple dress and pink-and-silver Skechers for a Friday Shabbat party, Snyder said. He was afraid to get out of the car at morning carpool, but by recess he was sitting with his friends as if nothing was different. The school opted not to send a letter to parents and ended up fielding only a handful of questions.

Camps, religious schools and day schools are encountering similar situations. More than 30 leaders from nine L.A.-area day schools participated in a daylong workshop last November about sexual identity and orientation. The program was organized in part by Conservative Temple Beth Am's Rabbi Yechiel Hoffman, its director of education and a trained educator for Keshet, a Boston-based Jewish LGBTQ advocacy and educational organization, which sponsored the programing. The workshop launched a yearlong program to foment cultural change.

"The issue tends not to be one of outright homophobia, but of creating environments that are less hetero-normative, and making institutions more welcoming and embracing to students and faculty and families who identify as LGBT," said Catherine Bell, national program director at Keshet.

Changes might start with something as simple as eliminating “male” or “female” check-off boxes on forms and leaving a blank line for gender. It might mean family trees that are more inclusive or fewer gender-segregated activities.

A year ago, the Los Angeles Jewish Federation, in partnership with JQ and IJSO, sponsored a similar workshop for Jewish communal professionals. Nearly 50 front-line Jewish professionals — executive directors, social workers, rabbis, mental health professionals — attended, focusing both on issues of sexual orientation and sexual identity.

And from the pulpit, at least two rabbis have given sermons about transgender issues this year, inspired by “Transparent.” The Amazon Prime TV show, which has won numerous top TV awards, features the patriarch of a comically dysfunctional Jewish family who, in his 70s, has come out as a woman. The show has also inspired a class at the San Francisco JCC and an active exchange among trans Jews on the show’s message board. Its Los Angeles-based creator, Jill Soloway, based the show on her parent’s transition just a few years ago; she said she is gratified to see “Transparent” opening up conversations in families.

“It’s kind of amazing how the show is affecting so many people,” Soloway said. “I think before, a lot of these people would have been bullied or committed suicide or gone underground. It was so shameful, even five years ago. The fact that this has lifted, the fact that the Internet has offered people the opportunity to say their truth to their families — I think there is exponential possibility for healing around these issues.”

In June, Congregation Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC), an LGBT synagogue on Pico Boulevard, will honor “Transparent’s” star, Jeffrey Tambor, with its annual Herman Humanitarian Award at a ceremony at the Skirball Cultural Center.

One of the most dramatic examples of transgender acceptance in the Los Angeles area is at the Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center (PJTC), which last summer became the first Conservative congregation to hire a trans rabbi. Rabbi Becky Silverstein beat out 40 other candidates to assume the post of education director.

“The real story is that this congregation is totally embracing him. The story is that it’s a non-story, which is I think the way we want it to go,” said Rabbi Joshua Grater, senior rabbi at PJTC.

“What is so beautiful to see is that people are responding to Becky’s Torah and his teaching and his ability to connect with people as just a person,” Grater said.

In an interview in his office, Silverstein said he recognized himself as gender-queer or gender nonconforming, the first time he heard the terms while at rabbinical school at Boston’s Hebrew College. He made the decision during rabbinical school to use male pronouns and to wear a kippah and tzitzit, in addition to the mostly male clothes he had been wearing for years.

But while he changed his Hebrew name from Rivka to Ezra Natan, he chose to hold on to his given name.

“I’m pretty attached to Becky and he, and creating that dissonance in the world. It both gets across my identity as someone who is outside the gender binary, and also satisfies my need to push people, and to push society,” said Silverstein, who is 33.

PJTC’s search committee debated whether to address the gender issue when introducing Silverstein to the congregation but decided it wasn’t necessary. It simply sent out his bio, using male pronouns. The community — from children to senior citizens — has been surprisingly nonchalant.

Experts agree that wider societal acceptance will come, much as it did for gays, when more people personally know people who are trans. But that sort of critical mass of people coming out that changed things for gays has not yet tipped in the trans community because the numbers are inevitably smaller. According to the website transgenderlaw.org, at most an estimated 2 percent to 5 percent of the population experiences some degree of gender dysphoria, but the number who identify as such is smaller.

“Many people don’t have the privilege of knowing them, and that is where it starts to be more like second nature to think about the diversity of human experience, and to be thoughtful and respectful of someone’s gender identity,” said Bell of Keshet.

Over the last several years, transgender Jews increasingly have found one another, building a base of support both locally and online.

Several books delve into the trans Jewish world, including “Balancing on the Mechitza” by Noach Dzmura and “Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders,” written by Joy Ladin, who in 2006 became the first tenured professor at the Orthodox Yeshiva University to come out as trans. Yiscah Sara Smith, who lived much of her life as a male Judaic studies teacher at Orthodox institutions in the U.S. and Israel, recently published “Forty Years in the Wilderness: My Journey to Authentic Living.”

Online, rabbinic pioneers Kukla and Zellman have founded TransTorah.org, with educational and ritual resources, including wedding liturgy, and ceremonies to acknowledge the practices of chest-binding, transitioning or changing a name.

In Los Angeles, gay Jewish organizations also have been a natural gathering place for transgender Jews. Gellis said in the first five years of its 10-year existence, JQ didn’t see many transgender people. But over the past five years, JQ has nurtured a group for trans Jews that has hosted Purim parties, a Havdalah service and Shabbat dinners, and has worked to integrate trans people onto its board.

Kol Ami and BCC have been at the forefront of embracing trans people, hosting trans events, creating naming rituals and serving as a resource to anyone with questions.

But even gay shuls are sometimes not as natural as they might seem for trans people, because some gays can feel betrayed by those who transition.

To help educate their community, BCC, which calls itself the “world’s first LGBT synagogue,” hosted a “Trans 101” class and has made some subtle changes in its services: When they read out the names of people who perished in the Holocaust or died of AIDS, they now say “people of all ages” instead of “men, women and children,” as some trans people don’t identify fully as a single gender. Even things such as baby namings or b’nai mitzvah need special accommodations, as both are based on assumptions about gender identity.

Those kinds of changes are just starting to seep into mainstream consciousness as more people are coming out as trans.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein of Conservative Valley Beth Shalom said he has helped several families struggling as their young-adult children transitioned.

“Transgender is not a movement or a culture or a thing,” Feinstein said. “They are individuals who find themselves often in remarkably difficult situations of being in the wrong body, and trying to search for their gender identity. And our job is to respond with love and to support the people that God meant them to be, and to look at them as individuals. It’s amazing how the insults and the jokes and the gazes stop when you realize that it’s someone’s brother or sister, or

the person who sits with you in shul and prays with the same kavanah [devotion]. When it stops being an abstraction, the ethics become clear.”

Joshua Gershick by [Julie Gruenbaum Fax](#)

Some years ago, Zsa Zsa Gershick and her wife, Elissa Barrett, went to visit Barrett’s grandparents at their retirement community in Texas.

“This is my granddaughter Elissa, and her lovely wife, Zsa Zsa,” Barrett’s grandmother would proudly tell her friends.

“Oh,” the delighted friends all responded. “Your granddaughter Elissa, and her lovely husband, Joshua!”



Elissa Barrett and Joshua Gershick. Photo by Marcia Perel Photography

Was it the “wife” that threw them off? Mishearing the unusual name, “Zsa Zsa”? Or was it the fashionable male clothing?

Whatever the reason, those prescient octogenarians were onto something: Last November, Gershick began to transition to male, and he decided to go with the name Joshua.

For Gershick, a 55-year-old playwright, author, gay activist and Army veteran, the transition to male hasn’t been all that dramatic — for the past 10 years Gershick has presented as a courtly, well-dressed gentleman who speaks in grammatically correct sentences with a florid vocabulary. He wears velvet vests and bow ties, holds doors open for women and can arrange a bouquet just so.

In fact, his sister-in-law told him his nieces have been secretly calling him “Uncle Zsa Zsa” for years, and Barrett, who’s been with him since 2001, said she’s been waiting for him to come to the realization that he was transgender.

Gershick said that, for years, waiters and clerks would stutter through sirs and ma'ams, but only recently he had begun to bristle whenever someone failed to realize that he wanted to be recognized as male. He knew he needed to make that subtle nudge along the gender spectrum to bring his internal and external beings into harmony.

“For me, being transgender means I am fully embracing all that I am — my female, my male — and being just authentic,” he said.

The first time he introduced himself as Joshua, “It was like a robe of chains fell off of me.”

Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, Gershick always felt different and always pictured himself as a boy. His Jewish identity also was confusing: His parents, deeply assimilated Jews wary of anti-Semitism they had seen growing up, didn't tell him he was Jewish until he was 13. He spent his teens and 20s trying to catch up on his Jewish identity — he went to Israel and said he belonged to a “coven” of Jewish lesbian feminists in San Francisco.

But it wasn't until he found Rabbi Lisa Edwards at Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC) 15 years ago that he truly connected as a Jew, and it was at BCC that he came out as transmale by giving a drash at Edward's invitation.

Barrett, who is vice president and general counsel at Bet Tzedek Legal Services, said she has witnessed how freeing Gershick's transition has been for him. For her part, she has had no problem adjusting to his new name or his pronouns and said she will unconditionally support whatever physical transformation he wants to make. Her biggest concern, she said, is that she herself might lose an important part of her own identity as a queer woman. The first time she referred to Joshua as a “he” at the dry cleaners, for instance, she was taken aback when the clerk tried to bond with her with an eye-rolling reference to “those men.”

“Twenty years ago when I came out, it was still a big deal, and I have had to embrace that and to stand up for myself as a queer woman. I treasure that part of my identity, of not being part of the norm. I love the queer community — our culture, our panache, our camp, our courage,” she said.

Gershick worried, too, that he might lose a part of himself if he abandoned Zsa Zsa.

“My principal concern was that if I came out and I told the truth about who I am, then people wouldn't love me. They loved Zsa Zsa” — he says the name as if it's on a marquee — “and all that name represented. But would they love Joshua? So far, when I've expressed that fear, people have said to me, ‘We love you. We don't care what we call you. We love your essence, your spirit, your neshamah.’ ”

And he knows from years of living as “a boy in a girl suit in boy clothing” that even strangers can eventually see the true person behind the exterior.

“I find, oftentimes, that if you give people permission to have their feelings, their reaction, usually they come around. I often speak to groups, and if no one in the audience knows me, you can usually feel this sense of, ‘Oh. Who is this?’ Then I begin talking, and usually talking the language of the heart, and you can see a subtle shift. And now they're not thinking about the necktie, not thinking about what's under those clothes. They're thinking about what you're saying and mapping their own experience. They're listening and have forgotten all about what, just five minutes before, was an obstacle.”

Couple Enjoys the Best of Both Worlds

by [Julie Gruenbaum Fax](#)

Mike Dennis was a married man for 40 years. He and his wife divorced in 2007, after he decided to stop hiding the fact that he was transgender. So, at 66, she was a heterosexual, transgender woman who now went by the name of Mike/Michelle and sometimes still dressed as a man. She was pretty sure love, for her, was a thing of the past.

Robin Gurse is a bisexual Jewish woman, now 65, who never married and has had some pretty painful relationships, mostly with men.

Robin and Mike/Michelle remember well an evening in 2010, just a few days after they met by chance (or was it beshert, fated?) at a self-empowerment seminar, and realized that their encounter could change their lives.

Mike/Michelle invited Robin to a play. Over dinner, Robin suddenly realized that this elegant woman, whom she by that point knew was also a man, was courting her. At the time, she laughed out loud; today she tears up at the memory of it.



Mike/Michelle and Robin (Gurse) Dennis on their wedding day

“I said, ‘Oh my God, is this the perfect person for me?’ ” Robin recalls.

As Robin speaks, Mike/Michelle jumps in. They were driving down Olympic Boulevard, Mike/Michelle remembers, and Robin told her she was bisexual.

“I just about drove off the road, because I thought, ‘This is so perfect!’ ” Mike/Michelle says.

Five months later, the two exchanged rings in a commitment ceremony, and within a year they officially married. Mike/Michelle wore a traditional white gown and pearls, and Robin wore a raspberry evening gown.

Rabbi Lisa Edwards of Beth Chayim Chadashim co-officiated with the pastor from Mike/Michelle's Brentwood Presbyterian Church. The couple remain actively involved in both congregations, as well as in JQ International, a Jewish LGBT organization, where Mike/Michelle organizes the speakers, and Robin handles the newsletter.

The two grew up less than a mile apart, near Centinela Avenue in West L.A., and both attended Venice High School, a few years apart. Robin was confirmed at Temple Adat Shalom and has warm memories of celebrations of Jewish holidays with her family.

The two have very different styles. Robin, a life coach who runs empowerment workshops for teens, sports jeans and a tie-dyed top, no makeup, and her cropped silver hair surely doesn't need more than a towel dry. She wears a simple wedding band and a small, silver Jewish star around her neck.

Mike/Michelle, by contrast, wears a frosty coif, her nails and makeup done just so, dangling earrings and a thick, silver necklace. On this day, she is also wearing black heels, polka-dotted black stockings and a striped bolero jacket over a short black dress with a thick elastic belt.

Mike/Michelle, who was the director of finance for the City of Santa Monica for 20 years and now teaches finance at UCLA, goes by male and female pronouns. He said he had wanted to be a girl since he was a young child. His then-wife knew, but had little patience for it, and he would secretly cross-dress whenever he could.

"Have you ever tried to keep an inflated beach ball underwater? That is what I did for years. And there was one night, when the kids were already off in college and my wife was asleep, and I knew I couldn't do it anymore. I got on my knees, and I said, 'Take my life, or show me something,' " Mike/Michelle says.

That was in the 1990s, and it was the fledgling Internet that opened up a new world for Mike/Michelle. Four years after that night, he joined a cross-dressers group. He divorced in 2007 and started dressing as Michelle most of the time.

It wasn't until they were ready to become sexually intimate that Robin met Mike, sans wig and lipstick.

"Even though I was totally clear that the person I was falling in love with was a person who would sometimes show up as female and sometimes as male, I think that moment was still startling. It still is, every once in a while. God has a great sense of humor — I get both!" Robin says.

Mike/Michelle said she keeps both names because that is who she is, and because the slash opens eyes.

"It always generates a question, and I get to interact with people. My intention is for them to leave with the notion, 'You're 72, about 5-7, 160 pounds, transgender and you wear a size 10 shoe.' What that does is it normalizes the experience and creates a safe space for transgender people. And that is really so important."

Alan W. by [Julie Gruenbaum Fax](#)



Alan W.

Alan W. is sitting at a table in Starbucks, looking uncomfortable. His shoulders hunch up a bit in his suit and open-collared shirt, and his trim goatee is surrounded by the five o'clock shadow of a long day spent with numbers at his job managing a funding program at the Department of Children and Family Services, where he's worked for 25 years.

Self-conscious and shy are lifelong defaults for Alan, who is 54. But, he said, he's not nearly as awkward as he was back when he lived in a woman's body.

"Everyone grows up not liking something about themselves, but to really be disconnected from who you are ... I never looked at myself in the mirror. I didn't like to look at my breasts and all that stuff," he said. Since transitioning nine years ago, Alan said he now feels free. "All of a sudden, you can be who you are and not be ashamed. I can look in the mirror and go, " 'Wow, I'm really who I am.' "

His confidence has been so lifted that he was able to stand up and speak before family friends at his adult bar mitzvah at Congregation Kol Ami four years ago — an unthinkable feat a few years before.

Kol Ami has been an anchor for him and his wife, Yaffa. (Yaffa's parents don't know that Alan used to have female parts, so the couple is using only first names for this article.)

Yaffa grew up Southern Methodist, and Alan grew up in Beverly Hills in a marginally Jewish home — his family occasionally attended services at Temple Isaiah on Pico Boulevard, and they also had a Christmas tree. He connected with Israel on a seven-month kibbutz stay while in college, but other than sporadic shul attendance, he was mostly disconnected from Judaism. Yaffa, who converted three years ago, insisted when they got together 10 years ago that they find a spiritual community, and they became regulars at Kol Ami.

One of Alan's most significant milestones was a naming ceremony held for him on Kol Ami's rooftop, where Rabbi Denise Eger bestowed on him his new Hebrew name, Avraham Saul.

“It was really the first step of me getting more in touch with my spirituality, my connection to community,” Alan said. “People we met in temple were there, and I could look out and see my family — they were proud and accepting.”

Alan’s split with his past has been pretty stark. He has changed his name and gender on his birth certificate, and he has a visceral reaction to seeing pictures of himself in his 20s and 30s. While everyone at work knows he transitioned, he doesn’t talk about it, and to new people he’s just another male. He showed up incognito at his Beverly Hills High School 30th reunion.

“I have had a lot of good experiences and good people in my life, but I want to go on with my life — I don’t want to always have to look back,” he said.

Still, he can also laugh about his transition. He jokes that after his mastectomy, he’s had to work out to build up his chest to look more buff. His nephew was 13 when Alan transitioned, and the two would compare facial hair growth and voice changes. He said he had the utter joy of going through puberty and menopause at the same time, and still laments the loss of his curly hair (he’s bald now).

But he knows some people lose everything when they transition, and he considers himself lucky for what he has — a supportive family, employers who stuck with him through transition, the resources to pay for treatments and a loving community.

“I have no regrets. I lived my life a certain way for a reason. If I had transitioned earlier, my life may have been different, or it may not have,” Alan said. “But I have no regrets. I feel a calmness and an acceptance in myself.”

Gender Variations in Jewish Law

by [Julie Gruenbaum Fax](#)

Rabbis of the Mishnah and Gemara, the Jewish oral law that developed from the second to the sixth century C.E., certainly knew nothing of the term transgender. But the rabbis did recognize variations in sexual anatomy and debated the halachic status of those who fell somewhere between clear-cut male and clear-cut female. Below are the categories the rabbis identified.

Zachar: Male

Nekevah: Female

Androgynos: A person who is intersex, or has aspects of both male and female sexual characteristics.

Tumtum: A person whose sexual characteristics are indeterminate or obscured.

Ay’lonit: A woman who does not develop secondary sexual characteristics at puberty and is infertile.

Saris: A male who does not develop secondary sexual characteristics and is infertile. Saris also refers to someone who has been castrated.