

# Kolot HaKeshet

# Inclusion Guide

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Voices of the Jewish Rainbow

First Edition

5780

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## Introduction

In December 2019, a group of LGBTI+ Jews came together in London to solve some of the problems we have faced in our lives. We were frustrated by feelings of disconnection and a conflict between our Jewish identities and our LGBTI+ identities. This guide is the result of our weekend discussing what needs to change so that we feel more welcome. Our co-learning weekend was funded through **Moishe House's Retreatology** program.<sup>1</sup>

We have shared our experiences so that people can become more aware of the rich diversity found in Jewish spaces. We have also included our recommendations for Jewish leaders to help their communities become more inclusive.

Part 1 of this guide provides a platform for topics that aren't often discussed in mainstream Jewish spaces. This section reflects a snapshot of the lives of LGBTI+ Jews in 5780 and what we feel needs to be talked about. We provide background information on each subject and a number of key messages we would like you to take away. The topics covered include:

- 1. Intersex Inclusion & Endonormativity**
- 2. Not Just Pride: Inclusion Throughout the Year**
- 3. Reimagining Family & Relationships**
- 4. Trans Inclusion & Thinking Beyond the Binary**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.moishehouse.org/retreatology/>

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Part 2 of this guide includes some more practical tips on creating more welcoming spaces for LGBTI+ Jews. Our recommendations are set out in answer to the following questions that we should all ask ourselves more often:

1. **How can we improve the representation of LGBTI+ Jews?**
2. **How can we include LGBTI+ Jewish young people?**
3. **How can our allies best support us?**

No community will ever be perfect and each community will have some steps that they cannot take. But we can all do something, even if it's something small. The guide comes from what we feel are the most pressing needs felt by LGBTI+ Jews today.

The best way to become more inclusive is to give LGBTI+ Jews the space to speak and be open to listening to what we might have to say. We all have unique experiences that vary greatly depending on how old we are, where we live and what other identities we hold. By reading this guide you are hearing a broad range of voices, but there will be others in your own community that are going unheard.

At the core of our understanding of the issues faced by LGBTI+ Jews is an awareness of **intersectionality**.<sup>2</sup> Intersectionality is a term coined by black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe the interaction between racism and misogyny that resulted in the unique discrimination faced by black women. Today, the framework has grown beyond the interaction between racism and sexism to encompass the many ways interlocking systems of power or oppression can affect people who hold multiple marginalised identities. As LGBTI+ Jews, we are not a homogenous group but have many differing experiences that result from the different identities we hold.



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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/what-is-intersectionality>

# Part 1

## 1.1 Intersex Inclusion & Endonormativity

### Background

Intersex is a term used to refer to people born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't align with the typical definitions of female or male.<sup>3</sup> It's a spectrum encompassing people with a range of genetic, endocrine and phenotypic sex characteristics.

People who do fit into the typical definitions of female or male are often referred to as endosex by the intersex community and its allies.<sup>4</sup> For example, someone with XX chromosomes who was born with a vulva and developed secondary sex characteristics such as breasts during puberty would be endosex.

Endonormativity is a centring of endosex experiences that portrays being endosex as the norm or default. This excludes intersex people and often leads to intersex people being seen as having an illness or disease. A direct result of endonormativity are the many unnecessary and invasive medical procedures that are carried out on intersex babies.<sup>5</sup>

Being intersex is very common, with the broadest definition including 1% of the population, but there is still a lack of knowledge through all levels of society.<sup>6</sup> This is even the case within the LGBTI+ community where intersex voices are also not often present. Although there is an overlap between the issues faced by intersex people with other parts of the community, based on principles of bodily autonomy and self determination, the specific difficulties are rarely discussed. But groups advocating for and supporting intersex people do exist such as [OII Europe](#), [InterAct](#) and [InterWednesday](#).

<sup>3</sup> [https://isna.org/faq/what\\_is\\_intersex/](https://isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex/)

<sup>4</sup> <https://ihra.org.au/18106/what-is-intersex/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/25/i-want-be-nature-made-me/medically-unnecessary-surgeries-intersex-children-us>

<sup>6</sup> <https://isna.org/faq/frequency/>

## Key Messages

- Biological sex is a spectrum and this is recognised in classical Jewish thought. *Mishnah Bikkurim* outlines which laws apply to an *androginus*, someone with ambiguous genitalia or having “**both male and female reproductive organs**.”<sup>7</sup> *Mishnah Yevamot* similarly references a *tumtum*, someone who has ambiguous genitalia that are “**impossible to determine by external examination**”.<sup>8</sup>
- Intersex is an umbrella term and there are many ways people can be intersex. People who are intersex may have:
  - Genetic variations such as XXY chromosomes;
  - Endocrine variations such as someone with XY chromosomes who has androgen insensitivity, leading to them being assigned female at birth;
  - Phenotypic variations such as ambiguous genitalia.
- Using language that people feel comfortable with can make our community spaces more inclusive. Some language or questions to avoid include:
  - The term **hermaphrodite** is offensive and factually inaccurate as no person has both a vulva and penis.
  - Asking anyone about their genitalia is never an appropriate topic of conversation but can be particularly distressing to intersex people, especially when we are asked what “**mix of genitals**” we have.
- It’s important to challenge the assumptions we make based on someone’s appearance. Being intersex is very common and many people can be unaware that they are intersex. Allowing people to share their stories before drawing our own conclusions will create more welcoming Jewish spaces for all of us.



<sup>7</sup> *Mishnah Bikkurim* 4:1

<sup>8</sup> *Mishnah Yevamot* 8:6

## 1.2 Not Just Pride: Inclusion Throughout the Year

### Background

There are lots of places where LGBTI+ Jews can attend Pride Shabbats during Pride season. There are also occasionally events for other significant dates such as Trans Day of Visibility or LGBT History Month. This is a great development for the wider Jewish community but it does not mean we've become fully inclusive. For many LGBTI+ Jews, having an event only during Pride season without implementing more systematic changes can feel tokenistic. While it's a great first step, we can take a more holistic approach to inclusion.

Personal engagement with LGBTI+ members of the congregation is key. We cannot know what people need if we do not ask them. Offering people space to talk about their experiences is great but it's important that we act and don't just listen. This will demonstrate to LGBTI+ Jews that we are truly trying to reach them and people will become more likely to open up and share their needs. We also often need the support of our straight and cisgender allies to push the community's leadership to become more inclusive and to reach out to its LGBTI+ members.

We understand that there can be a lack of confidence among community leaders when trying to build a more inclusive community. Hosting a Pride Shabbat is still a good starting point but there can be confusion when thinking about the next steps. Engaging with LGBTI+ people in your congregation can help you build on a solid foundation. It's often better to announce that you're looking for guidance on these topics rather than approaching people individually. Especially if there isn't an out LGBTI+ person who's indicated they'd be willing to talk to you.

## Key Messages

- One-off events are great but it can often be more impactful to change day to day systems and structures. This increases the visibility of LGBTI+ Jews within Jewish community spaces and demonstrates that we're welcomed the rest of the year, not just over Pride weekend. Some ideas could be:
  - Putting regular LGBTI+ themed After Kiddush Talks on the rota;
  - Film screenings for the whole community;
  - Inviting LGBTI+ rabbis to give Jewish learning sessions.
- If community leaders are unsure or lacking in confidence, the best strategy is to open up conversations with LGBTI+ members of the community. This can be as simple as asking people what they would have liked before and what can be done now. This could even be done as a survey to begin with but the key is to act as well as to listen. Once we show people that we are willing to learn and change things, they're much more likely to enter into a deeper dialogue.
- We all have finite resources which can make planning deeper and longer term changes more daunting. Smaller communities are also often concerned about numbers and holding an event with low attendance can feel like a waste of time and money. Partnerships and alliances are a great way to firstly have a greater impact by influencing more communities, reaching more people and pooling resources. It also increases the likelihood of LGBTI+ people attending if there's the chance to meet people from other communities.





## 1.3 Reimagining Family & Relationships

### Background

For many LGBTI+ people, families and relationships can be a fraught and distressing topic. We often carry a lot of pain from growing up in unsupportive households or we may be estranged from family members entirely. This is why there is a concept of having a chosen family in many LGBTI+ communities and spaces around the world. This is no different for LGBTI+ Jews and often our Jewish communities form part of our chosen family. As [Am Yisrael](#), we are rooted in ideas of kinship and shared ancestry. This can be very healing for those of us wanting to connect with new stories of family.

A more challenging aspect can be approaching the [halachah](#), especially within more traditionally observant communities. There are many writings devoted to these topics that can counter religious legal arguments much more eloquently than we can. But there is one topic that is not often discussed: the first [mitzvah](#), “[peru u’revu](#),” “be fruitful and multiply.”<sup>9</sup> There are many Jews who don’t keep this [mitzvah](#) according to its traditional interpretation and not all of them are LGBTI+. But just as there are different models for defining the family we descend from, there are different models of being fruitful. This could be anything from adopting a child to being a teacher. Or it could even be just looking out for a new member of the community who’s converted to Judaism and providing them with a seat at your seder table. All of these and more can contribute to the continuation of Jewish life within our communities.

There are many different ways of approaching relationships within the LGBTI+ community. These can be gay relationships, they can be polyamorous relationships, they can be interfaith relationships, they can be purely platonic relationships. But they all deserve to be celebrated as our relationships deeply impact on our lives and thus our communities as a result.

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<sup>9</sup> [Bereishit](#) 1:28

## Key Messages

- Our communities will become much richer if we share different stories about forming families and relationships. We most likely all know an interfaith family and this should be celebrated just as much as a LGBTI+ couple, someone who doesn't want children or a group of friends living together.
- LGBTI+ inclusive relationship education has been a prominent topic of conversation in the UK in recent months. Just as it is important young people see and learn about different forms of families and relationships in schools, they should see this mirrored in their Jewish lives. Not only does this benefit LGBTI+ young people, it leads to more understanding and acceptance among their peers.
- A great source of comfort for many Jews is our rituals and prayers that mark many parts of the cycle of life and death. Depending on our communities, we may also be creating new rituals to mark new points in our modern lives. We can do this by **changing existing language** or **creating new blessings**.<sup>1011</sup> Working with people to reclaim Jewish rituals can make them feel welcome, supported and understood.
- Some community spaces already have LGBTI+ inclusive **matchmaking** or shidduch services and this is a growing area.<sup>12</sup> If these are events or services available to straight and cisgender community members, consider expanding them to include LGBTI+ people. LGBTI+ young adult dinners are another great strategy for people to build friendships and feel more integrated into the wider community and can be more accessible to asexual or aromantic people.



<sup>10</sup> <https://www.keshetonline.org/resources/queer-chosen-family-blessing-for-the-children/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/prayer-chosen-family>

<sup>12</sup> <https://beta.yenteovertherainbow.com/home>

## 1.4 Trans Inclusion & Thinking Beyond the Binary

### Background

The term transgender, or trans, refers to people who don't identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.<sup>13</sup> Trans is an umbrella encompassing trans men, trans women and non-binary people who don't identify as men or women. Identities beyond men and women are not a new idea. Many cultures throughout history have recognised this and it is also found within the *Talmud*.<sup>14</sup> People who do identify with the gender they were assigned at birth are cisgender, or cis for short. Cisnormativity is the centring of the experiences of cisgender people. This perpetuates the idea that identifying with the gender you were assigned at birth is the norm or default.<sup>15</sup>

Although there has been an increase in the visibility of trans lives throughout wider society in the last five or so years, this is not often mirrored within Jewish communities. Trans issues are also an uncommon topic of conversation, even within Jewish spaces that designate themselves as “LGBT.” These conversations are very necessary owing to the highly gendered nature of Jewish ritual, prayer and community life. For example, if a trans woman is part of a community with a mechitza, is she able to sit with the other women? What language would a non-binary person be able to use when called up for aliyah? Although gender diversity is written about in our classical texts, we need to have conversations outlining how trans Jews can engage with Jewish life today.

The trans community is currently facing hostility and backlash in the media and from governments around the world. At this time, we need support from within our Jewish communities more than ever. We need our allies to empathise with us and to speak out against transphobia. We have long been a part of *Am Yisrael* and we always will be.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/what-does-trans-mean>

<sup>14</sup> *Mishnah Bikkurim* 4; *Mishnah Yevamot* 8

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/heteronormativity-definition/>

## Key Messages

- It's important for community leaders to be proactive and think about their positions on welcoming trans people. Not all community spaces can become fully trans inclusive overnight, but establish positions on how trans Jews can engage with services. Some things are statutory rights, such as being able to use the correct bathroom, but some aspects of ritual and prayer are not. Once you have formalised your positions, create a trans inclusion statement outlining your stance and publicise it on your website or noticeboard. If there are out trans people in your community, involve them in the process.
- In addition to being transparent about inclusion, rabbis and community leaders should prepare a policy or set of guidelines to support trans people coming out. As spiritual and community leaders, there is a duty of care owed to congregants who may turn to their Jewish community to seek pastoral support. Education is always a good starting point. This could be informal and conducted by researching trans issues. However there are also organisations that support the trans community who can provide training and consultancy on drafting policies to support trans people. Examples include **Gendered Intelligence**, the largest trans-led organisation in the UK, and **Mermaids**, a charity that supports the families of trans children.
- Ritual can potentially be trickier for Trans Jews to navigate, especially in more traditional settings. However Jewish ritual is typically used to mark important points in individuals' and communities' lifecycles. Transition is one example of a modern milestone in some people's lives and one that ritual can be reclaimed to recognise. There are many examples of such gender transition rituals and blessings including such as **the Gender Transition Milestone ceremony** created by the progressive mikveh, **Mayyim Hayyim**.<sup>16</sup>



<sup>16</sup> <https://www.mayyimhayyim.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Gender-Transition-Milestone.pdf>

# Part 2

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## 2.1 How can we improve the representation of LGBTI+ Jews?

Increasing representation of a marginalised group is often a useful tool to improve acceptance and understanding of different experiences. It can be especially effective when people from marginalised backgrounds are seen among community leadership. If you're already in a position of leadership, we would encourage you to think about how you can make the bodies you're part of more diverse.

Different types of Jewish organisations can tackle underrepresentation in differing ways:

- Rabbinical schools can strive to reach different parts of the wider Jewish community with their marketing. It is unlikely that LGBTI+ Jews would apply to a rabbinical program somewhere they don't think they'll be accepted. If you are a seminary that would like to have a diverse range of applicants, then it is up to you to demonstrate you would be an inclusive place of learning.
- Rabbis and existing synagogue leadership teams can explore ways of developing lay leadership from among the LGBTI+ community. Whether this is by encouraging people to join the council or by joining courses to become *baalei tefillah*, there are many avenues depending on people's existing skills.
- If you are a small community with fewer resources for growing LGBTI+ Jewish leadership, think about other ways you can platform existing voices. An event with a visiting LGBTI+ rabbi could provide an opportunity for your congregation to learn. It could be tied to an event in the calendar, such as Trans Day of Visibility or Pride month, or it could just be for an everyday Shabbat service.



## 2.2 How can we include LGBTI+ Jewish young people?

Jewish communities are uniquely placed to have a powerful impact on young LGBTI+ Jews. Many spaces and rituals exist to ensure the next generation is proud of their identity and explore their Jewish heritage. The benefits that could result from making these spaces inclusive and allowing young LGBTI+ Jews to feel proud of all aspects of their identity would be transformative. For example, many studies have shown that when young trans people are listened to and respected, they don't have any higher risks of mental health conditions than their cis peers.<sup>17</sup> Acceptance changes lives.

There are a few areas where young Jews interact with Jewish community spaces that could be used to reach young LGBTI+ Jews:

- **Cheder** provides a unique opportunity for young Jews to access inclusive education materials. There are numerous ways to create inclusive cheder classes and inclusion for you could just be talking about the different meanings of the rainbow while learning about Noah's Ark. Or, it could be by discussing the history of marriage and marriage equality when learning about Jewish rituals for marriage.
- As mentioned in part 1, reclaiming and recreating Jewish ritual can be a valuable tool to help LGBTI+ Jews connect more with their Jewish identity. This applies to young LGBTI+ Jews too, with the stand out example being a bar or bat mitzvah. On such an important day, young LGBTI+ Jews should feel as comfortable as possible and this may be achieved by having a gender-neutral **bnei mitzvah**.<sup>18</sup> Being flexible and welcoming when it comes to ritual can help young Jews create a more lasting bond with their heritage and Jewish identity.



<sup>17</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/feb/26/crucial-study-transgender-children-mental-health-family-support>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.keshetonline.org/resources/a-guide-for-the-gender-neutral-b-mitzvah/>

## 2.3 How can our allies best support us?

Allies play a pivotal role in creating more welcoming and inclusive spaces. But there is often some confusion from well-meaning people on how they can be good allies. Part of being an ally is continually learning and taking the initiative to educate yourself using resources such as this Inclusion Guide.

To be a good ally you should consider the following tips:

- Keep yourself up to date with current terminology. Language is constantly changing and keeping up to date with it can be a way to demonstrate you have awareness. This can help with creating inclusive messaging.
- Challenge ignorance when you encounter it in a positive and non-shaming way. If you hear someone using outdated language without any malicious intent, take them to one side and gently explain the correct terms. If you encounter bigotry, it is still best to tackle this without escalating the situation and putting people in greater harm. **Communities Inc** have a **Bystander Intervention Guide** on how to best support someone experiencing hate crime.<sup>19</sup>
- Be prepared to make mistakes. No one is perfect and the likelihood is, you'll say something that isn't quite right every now and then. But if someone corrects you, try to see it as an opportunity for further learning. Don't get defensive, just apologise, correct yourself and move forward.

Allies play an important role in speaking up for people who are silenced. Even the smallest act of support and allyship can make a big difference. So thank you for being an LGBTI+ ally! For more information, check out this **Guide to Allyship**.<sup>20</sup>



<sup>19</sup> <http://communitiesinc.org.uk/2020/04/13/bystander-interventions/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.guidetoallyship.com/>



## Conclusion

Inclusion for LGBTI+ Jews will look different for each community. It's important to remember that creating welcoming spaces is a journey of continuous listening and learning, not a to do list. The most transformative thing you can do is to give LGBTI+ Jews the opportunity to speak and talk about what they need. If everyone is content and feels a valued part of the community, fantastic. But that doesn't mean you're off the hook forever! Our communities aren't static and neither are people's individual needs. As new people come into your spaces, they also need to feel able to speak up.

However, if people do have needs, don't just listen. Engage and actively work to change your spaces to be as welcoming as they possibly can be. It's not enough to have tokenistic displays of allyship. These come across as insincere and can have the opposite effect of putting LGBTI+ Jews off speaking up. If we constantly raise things but nothing gets done, why would we continue to do so? Be honest about what you can and can't do and how long changes may take to happen.

Remember this is an ongoing process of listening and learning. There is always more that you could do to educate yourself whether that's informally on the internet or through formal training. While this Inclusion Guide can be a great first step, it should be one of many.

For specialised support, please contact [KeshetUK](https://www.keshetuk.org/).<sup>21</sup> They work with Jewish schools, youth and young adult organisations, synagogues, and wider community organisations to help them become more inclusive through education and training.<sup>22</sup>



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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.keshetuk.org/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.keshetuk.org/lgbtinclusiontraining.html>