

Active Inclusivity

By Carolyn Levy

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Shir Tikvah Congregation

Shabbat Shalom. Thank you for the opportunity to speak tonight about Active Inclusivity.

Besides being a member of Sir Tikvah, I am also a member of the St Paul JCC where I am on the book fair committee. Every year the Twin Cities Jewish Book Fair brings authors to town to speak about their work. Most of these are in the fall, but there are also several events through the year.

Shir Tikvah has signed on as a Community Partner for a book fair event which will feature Joy Ladin. She will be speaking at the JCC on Thursday, April 11 at 7 pm about her book "Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey Between Genders." The most important part of being a Community Partner is that we support this event by our attendance. And it is my job to tell you why you should!

Joy Ladin is a poet and an English professor at Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women. Joy Ladin was born Jay Ladin, and in 2006 when, shortly after receiving tenure, she told University officials that she was transitioning to a female body, she was put on indefinite leave and barred from even coming on campus. Many at the Orthodox Jewish university were horrified by the presence of a transgender professor. Some feared the news could cut alumni donations. Rabbi Moshe Tendler, a senior dean at Yeshiva's rabbinical school and a professor of biology and medical ethics said the following: "He's not a woman. He's a male with enlarged breasts... He's a person who represents a kind of amorality which runs counter to everything Yeshiva University stands for. There is just no leeway in Jewish law for a transsexual... There is no niche where he can hide out as a female without being in massive violation of Torah law, Torah ethics and Torah morality." The decision to exclude her from the campus was ultimately revoked after Ladin's lawyers sent a letter to the school and word of the potential lawsuit became public, even featured in the New York Times.

"Through the Door of Life" recounts Ladin's journey as she transitioned and recreated herself in the face of opposition not only from her employers, but from her family, her faith, her community, and especially her children who had to grapple with their own transition from having a male father.

My own connection to this subject comes from experiences at work. I work in the theatre and am a professor at Hamline University where there is a growing community of transgender students. One of these, who graduated 2 years ago, was a theatre major. To preserve anonymity, I will call him Jack. When Jack told us he would be transitioning from a female body to a male body, I was, I must admit, very ignorant on this subject. I realized that in order to continue to

work with this particular student I needed to learn some more. So, I read a lot of books and articles on the subject, learning more about the formation of gender identity, but also about the enormous discrimination and harassment experienced by transpeople and the huge psychological toll of living with secrecy and fear. This was a world of discrimination and hatred of which I had never known.

Jack, as well as several other students I grew close to in the last few years, have been very generous in answering my questions, in talking about their journeys with other students and in telling us directly what they would like to see happen on our campus. Issues of bathrooms, name changes, filling out forms, dorm rooms, pronouns and in my department, dressing rooms and role assignments all emerged as needing attention. I am the founder and director of Making Waves, the Hamline Social Justice Theatre Troupe. We create short pieces about a variety of issues and perform them around our campus and the community and follow them with a facilitated discussion. We began with issues like racism, homophobia, religious intolerance, hunger and homelessness. Two years ago we undertook to create a short play about a transgender student. This involved the students also becoming more educated about transgender people and also about transphobia.

What began as a move to understand one particular student, has become for me, an important part of my own social justice work. And, I think this is a crucial topic for Shir Tikvah to examine as well. We learned a very important lesson last fall about active as opposed to passive inclusivity. We are very proud of our congregation, of our radical hospitality and our inclusivity. We are proud of our diverse community. But what we learned was that is it not enough to be inclusive inside these four walls. It was not enough to celebrate same sex unions inside our synagogue. We had to go out of these doors and proclaim our beliefs loudly for all to hear, even if we were in opposition to other Jews. And we needed to join with members of other faith communities who were also proclaiming their views in public, often in opposition to members of their own faiths. And we learned that when we did that, we had some power.

And so here too, we can't stand idly by when a rabbi, a recognized Jewish leader, says things like Joy Ladin "represents a kind of amorality" ... and "There is just no leeway in Jewish law for a transsexual..." and that Ladin is in massive violation "of Torah law, Torah ethics and Torah morality." If we disagree with statements like that, if they offend our very core, we need to make our voices heard outside this building. And we need to be prepared to meet opposition from members of our own faith.

I wanted to speak tonight to convince you to come on April 11th and hear Ladin speak, and even to read her book. But I have really come to talk about social justice and social change. I am clear that attending Ladin's talk in and of itself will not bring social change. But I can imagine that some of you may know as little as I did when Jack first came to see me. So, this can be a start of a growing awareness and education on the subject. Or, perhaps you may already know a

great deal. In that case, come to support her and to learn, as I hope to, what else we can do as Jews committed to Tikkun Olam. What are the steps we need to take here at Shir Tikvah, in the Twin Cities and in the Jewish community at large to repair this piece of our world?

I don't think Joy Ladin set out to be a transgender activist in the Jewish community. Rather, she set out to become herself. But, because there were so few voices out there, particularly Jewish voices, willing to speak about their experiences she has emerged as that proud spokesperson. She said recently in interview with Capital New York: "I know that in the Orthodox world... I am this beacon of hope for transpeople and queer people in general."

I urge you all to read her book. You can get a copy at the St. Paul JCC or at Common Good Books, or no doubt online. We have fliers about the event to pass out here and there are some in the Kiddush hall. Please join with other members of our active inclusive community at Shir Tikvah and come hear her speak on April 11th.

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom.