

Arkansas' Oppression of Transgender Youth: What Congregation B'nai Israel Can Do

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On Tuesday, the Arkansas House and Senate overrode Governor Hutchinson's veto, enacting a law that would prohibit Arkansas parents and physicians from providing life-affirming and even life-saving medical care to transgender young people. Upon hearing that news, our Temple President, Amanda Ferguson, swung into action. As many of you know, Amanda is Manager of Youth Services at Central Arkansas Library System. She arranged a display in the Main Library, featuring a sign: "The ... Teen Center is a Safe Space. We Support LGBTQA Youth and Teens." Also on that table, Amanda displayed over twenty books, with titles such as *Trans Mission*, *Gender Explorers*, and *Trans Teen Survival Guide*.

Amanda is not a member of the General Assembly; and if she were, she would have been among the pitifully small minority of legislators voting against the bill and to uphold the Governor's veto. In other words, Amanda could not stop what Governor Hutchinson called a "product of the cultural war in America," a bill that is "overbroad, extreme and does not grandfather young people currently on hormone treatment."¹ And yet, Amanda was not helpless.

President Theodore Roosevelt famously said, "Do what you can, where you are, with what you have." Where was Amanda? At work, in Little Rock's Main Library. What did she have? Books! Just as important, Amanda had a desire to help. So, instead of despairing about what she could not change, Amanda did what she could, and that was something important: Amanda ensures that transgender or gender nonconforming teens, or young people questioning their gender identity, who came into the Library's Teen Center would be affirmed there.

Amanda also sent another none-too-subtle message: The General Assembly's action on Tuesday makes Arkansas unsafe for transgender youth.

Let's be clear on the facts: No irreversible gender reassignment treatment— to be specific, no gender reassignment surgery—is available to minors in Arkansas. Instead, in the words of Arkansas Children's Hospital, "The Gender Spectrum Clinic provides healthcare services to youth with gender dysphoria, using a gender affirmative model of care and individualized treatment plans developed for each patient. The Gender Spectrum interdisciplinary team collaborates with patients, parents/guardians, mental health therapy providers and schools to ensure the best possible health care outcomes... Our ultimate goal is to provide high-quality,

evidence-based and gender-affirming care in a comfortable and safe environment.”ⁱⁱ A common treatment is “Puberty suppression therapy,”ⁱⁱⁱ which is reversible. As the American Medical Association’s *Journal of Ethics* explains, “Should [a young person] decide not to change sex, ‘puberty suppressant drugs can be withheld and development restarts as normal.’”^{iv}

In fact, the *Journal* reports, the greater danger to the young transgender person is withholding treatment: “The importance of preventing development of secondary sex characteristics during [adolescence] cannot be overstated. Once these children, who are already experiencing considerable distress...undergo [puberty’s] development of the ‘wrong’ sex, their psychological well-being deteriorates significantly, and many develop...suicidal ideation...They can be bullied and abused. Such circumstances can lead these youths to drop out of school and develop significant psychological morbidity. Because these risks are so great, the need for medical and psychological intervention is paramount. Suppressing puberty and allowing children the opportunity to explore their true gender identities decreases their risk for suicide.”^v

Arkansas’ new law is deadly dangerous. The General Assembly’s callous self-righteousness is so overwhelming that we may be dumbstruck, I am reminded of Moses’s brother Aaron, who is silent when his sons, Nadav and Avihu, are struck dead.^{vi} Shortly thereafter, “Moses chastises Aaron’s remaining sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, for not eating their portion of the community’s sin offering; [and] Aaron finds his voice again.” Rabbi Jonathan Kraus explains: “Might Aaron’s remaining sons not need their father to voice some feeling, some sense of loss, some acknowledgement of the terrifying, shattering possibly unjust loss of their two older brothers?”^{vii}

Like Aaron, the time has come for us to speak. Like Eleazar and Ithamar, the transgender and nonbinary members of our Temple community need reaffirmation that Congregation B’nai Israel is their safe space. Arkansas, where so many houses of worship grotesquely celebrate this repressive new law, needs to know people of faith who insist that God’s love is for every single one of God’s children—in this moment, especially including those whom God has created in bodies that do not conform to their gender identities. We at Congregation B’nai Israel can only, like our Temple President, do what we can, where we are, with what we have. The fact that we cannot reverse the law on our own must not silence us.

Some concrete steps:

- Check on transgender friends. The transgender folks among us need to know that others of us understand that they are hurting and that we are there for them.

- Voice disapproval of the General Assembly’s hateful law publicly. Even posting on Facebook matters: Our transgender friends, in and beyond our congregation, see that they are loved.
- And, most importantly—and most difficult for many, the time has come to share our pronouns.

About five years ago, with our Confirmation class at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism’s *L’taken* Social Justice Seminar, the young adult daughter of a friend was leading a session. I have known Liya since she was born, and I was quite perplexed when she introduced herself, saying, “My pronouns are she/her/hers.” Anybody looking at Liya would know that she’s a woman. I texted her mother: “Why did she say that?” My friend replied: “Ask Liya.”

Liya was patient with me, as she explained. Transgender and nonbinary folks are often called by the wrong gender pronouns. If they want others to get it right, they may have to share their pronouns. For those of us who are cisgender—that is, whose genders align with the sex we were assigned at birth—announcing our pronouns may not feel necessary. However, when I introduce myself, saying “My pronouns are he/him/his,” I signal that **everybody’s** gender is valid. I am saying, “Your gender identity is **normal**, whether or not it’s the one you were assigned at birth.

I realize that introducing oneself that way feels odd at first, just as I was surprised by Liya’s announcement. That discomfort is a small price to pay to save lives. The American Academy of Pediatrics has published a study demonstrating that transgender and nonbinary youth have attempted suicide at rates several times that of the general population. For example, over half of female to male adolescents had attempted suicide in the year of the study.^{viii}

Pikuach Nefesh, saving lives, is Judaism’s highest value. For the same reason that we are worshiping via Zoom tonight, saving lives by not gathering in person yet, let us all assure that Congregation B’nai Israel is a safe space where transgender and nonbinary members and guests are celebrated and affirmed. Let us all share our gender identities, thereby affirming that every gender is valid. Each human being, and all gender, is created in God’s image—holy, whole, and beautiful.

Later this week, the same General Assembly that adopted the hateful law endangering transgender youth also adopted a wonderful law, mandating Holocaust education at every level of Arkansas public education. Our Temple youth leader, David Ronnel and his father Steve were among the Arkansans who worked diligently to see this bill passed, and our Temple Board endorsed it on

behalf of the congregation. Governor Hutchinson signed it into law yesterday on *Yom HaShoah*, Holocaust Memorial Day.

During spring break, David testified in the Senate Education Committee. He said: “Arkansas can be a leader in our region by passing this bill. We can eliminate the Holocaust education gap in Arkansas, and we can slow the spread of hatred and bigotry by teaching tolerance to students through the lessons of the Holocaust.”

Please join me in prayer and David in faith that Holocaust education will teach future members of the Arkansas General Assembly about the horrific consequences of treating others as less than fully human—a lesson that a substantial majority of the current legislature very badly needs to learn.

Amen.

ⁱ Brianna Kwasnik and Rachel Herzog, “Governor vetoes transgender bill, calls measure ‘a product of the cultural war,’” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, April 5, 2021.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.archildrens.org/programs-and-services/gender-spectrum-clinic?journey=symptoms>.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} Jason Lambrese, MD, “Suppression of Puberty in Transgender Children,” *AMA Journal of Ethics*, August, 2010, <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/suppression-puberty-transgender-children/2010-08>.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} Leviticus 10:1-3.

^{vii} Rabbi Jonathan Kraus, “*Sh’tikah*—What Kind of Silence?”, *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, edited by Rabbi Barry H. Block, New York: CCAR Press, 2020, 164.

^{viii} Russell B. Toomey, Amy K. Syvertsen and Maura Shramko, “Transgender Adolescent Suicide Behavior,” *Pediatrics*, *Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, October 2018. <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/142/4/e20174218>.