

Yachad/Together

Welcoming Spaces for LGBTQ+ Jews: A Conservative Movement/Masorti Guide



This Guide was produced under the aegis of the LGBTQ+ Working Group of the Social Justice Commission of the Conservative/Masorti Movement.

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Table of Contents

- **[Introduction, pp. 2-3](#)**
 - This Guide is for...?
 - Why This Guide?
- **[Everyday Language, pp. 3-4](#)**
 - Vocabulary
 - Pronouns
 - Signage
- **[Ritual Language, p. 4](#)**
 - Torah Honors
 - Non-binary language in siddurim/mahzorim and queer liturgy
- **[Torah Learning, p. 5](#)**
- **[Halakhah/Ritual Practice, pp. 5-6](#)**
 - CJLS (Committee on Jewish Law & Standards) Responsa and Papers
 - The Teshuva-Writing Collective
 - Rising Tide Open Waters *Mikveh* Network
 - Kavod v'Nichum: Support for Inclusive End-of-Life Rituals
 - Guide to All-Gender Inclusion in Ritual Spaces
- **[“Inclusion Shabbat” Dinners and Other Programming, pp. 6-7](#)**
- **[Rabbinical Assembly Resolutions, p. 7](#)**
- **[Ongoing and Further Action, pp. 7-8](#)**
 - Shivyon Project
 - Women’s League for Conservative Judaism and Federation of Jewish Men’s Club Initiative
 - Jewish Education Project
- **[Inclusion Checklists, pp. 8-9](#)**
- **[Organizational Support, p. 9](#)**
- **[Inclusive Mission and Welcoming Statements, pp. 9-10](#)**
- **[Invitation to Making This a More Useful and Responsive Guide, p. 10](#)**

Introduction

- **This Guide is for...?**

This guide is for you, me, your synagogue, institution or organizational community, particularly if it is affiliated with or has an orientation toward the large tent of Conservative/Masorti Judaism. The Conservative Movement interacts with and is informed by our rich heritage. While one can find plenty of resources scattered across the Internet, we have tried to assemble materials to help you and your community on your journey toward inclusion and welcoming, wherever you are in the process.

- **Why this Guide?**

In the Conservative Movement, we are striving toward creating more welcoming spaces in our religious and communal life. Matters of inclusion and equity for LGBTQ+ Jews are not always obvious; this guide serves to make this easier.

Let's address the following concerns:

1. *We know that LGBTQ+ Jews do not compromise a monolithic entity; we want to make sure we're including everyone.*

It is very important to include LGBTQ+ Jews in your deliberations on how best to move forward. They are more likely to have a handle on concerns involving the structure and culture of the local LGBTQ+ community and what at least many local LGBTQ+ Jews need.

It is true that, as the acronym implies, LGBTQ+ Jews encompass a wide range of identities, orientations, philosophies, and life patterns. Just as our people came out of Egypt a "mixed multitude," the Jewish community today also includes a "mixed multitude" of people. That reflects the diversity among the wider Jewish community, and it is exciting to forge a path to walk together toward the "Promised Land," the land of inclusion and unity. We hope this Guide helps you and your community do that.

2. *With such a large variety of Jews, we may feel we're not sure where to begin in our specific community, institution, or organization—or, we're not sure what our next steps should be.*

This is a completely natural feeling. There is no one right way to include, but our tradition wisely affirms, "If there is a will, there is a way." If you are reading this, you and your community already have the will; we hope the ideas discussed and suggestions put forth in this guide will help you to make the best choices for your community.

3. *We have tried in the past, but we encountered pushback from various sectors, perhaps including some LGBTQ+ people themselves.*

This is expected. Change is difficult for everyone. For some, you will move too far too fast; for others, it will feel as if you are moving too slowly and doing too little. You'll want to address one group's hopes even as you try to assuage another group's fears. You'll also want to persist in helping your community be more welcoming and inclusive because your community has much to gain by including everyone's voices, talents, and energies. We hope this guide strengthens you in your efforts.

4. *We have been afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. The last thing we want to do is to hurt the very group of Jews we so want to include.*

We have all said things that were ill-framed and did things that might have been thought through better. People of good will understand that none of us is perfect and that we are trying to

become better people and forge a stronger community. We all need to support one another. This guide offers suggestions on avoiding pitfalls and accepting yourselves and your community where you are, even as you continue your inclusion efforts. As mentioned, every attempt should be made to include LGBTQ+ voices in your efforts.

5. In the past, Jewish tradition and halakhah did not seem to support the welcoming and inclusion of LGBTQ+ Jews. As Conservative Jews, we feel our hands may be tied.

The various arms of the movement have all passed resolutions and are committed to embracing LGBTQ+ Jews. Our Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards has already produced significant material to help all of us on this journey. This Guide points you to much of this material.



Everyday Language

Judaism teaches the importance of naming to accurately represent people and things, yet language around gender and sexual orientation can be confusing. These resources focus specifically on vocabulary and language concerns.

- **Vocabulary**

- *An annotated image from Boston University School of Public Health that helpfully explains the difference in basic terms, e.g. gender identity vs. gender expression, sexual attraction vs. romantic attraction:*

[The Genderbread Person 4.0](#)

- *A more complete listing from Keshet (an organization working toward the full equality of all LGBTQ Jews in Jewish life) of important terms widely used in conversations:*

[LGBTQ+ Terminology](#)

- **Pronouns**

- *This resource from Keshet includes a guide to pronouns and gender-neutral pronouns, with an emphasis on addressing questions about using “they” as a singular pronoun:*

[What's in a Pronoun?: Third-Person and All-Gender Pronouns](#)

- *An excellent guide from GLSEN (an organization working to ensure that LGBTQ students are able to learn and grow in a school environment free from bullying and harassment), set up in a FAQs format, with a glossary as well:*

[PRONOUNS: A RESOURCE](#)

- **Signage**

- *Bathrooms Signs from ADA Sign Depot:*
[ADA Compliant Signage for Bathrooms](#)
[NOTE: If your facility only has gendered bathrooms you can post a sign or otherwise communicate a policy stating: "You are welcome to use the bathroom that best aligns with your gender identity."
- *Safe Zone Stickers from Keshet:*
[LGBTQ Jewish Safe Zone and Pride Stickers](#)
- *For a comprehensive guide to bathroom signage:*
[Inclusive Bathroom Signage Recommendations](#) (from the Rainbow Alliance Inclusion Network, State of Washington Human Resources)
- *Welcome Sign for Events from OneTable:*
[Radically Welcoming You](#)

Ritual Language

Traditional prayers and rituals have been couched in language that has not been inclusive, particularly of non-binary and gender non-conforming Jews. The material here aims toward helping us to correct this, so all can participate comfortably.

- **Torah Honors**

- *This responsum, passed by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards in 2022, suggests how to call up non-binary individuals during Torah services:*
[Calling Non-Binary People to Torah Honors \(Rabbis Guy Austrian, Robert Scheinberg, and Deborah Silvers\)](#)
- *A one-pager to have on the Bimah:*
[Inclusive Gabbai Guide](#)
- *Downloadable cards from the Rose Crown Minyan at Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago:*
[Gender-Inclusive Aliyah Cards](#)

- **Non-binary language in *siddurim/mahzorim* and queer liturgy**

- *The Nonbinary Hebrew Project seeks to find a way by which non-binary individuals can express themselves in (traditionally gendered) Hebrew:*
[Nonbinary Hebrew Project](#)
- *Tefillat Trans, from the Trans Halakha Project at SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, develops liturgy around the trans experience by and for trans Jews:*
[Tefillat Trans](#)

Torah Learning

Study is central to our Jewish tradition and Conservative Movement. This section contains materials that explore queer issues and concerns and are suitable for individual or group study.

- **Torah commentary and other material through an LGBTQ+ lens** (*from Keshet*): <https://www.keshetonline.org/resources/topic/torah-commentary/>
- **Anthology of *divrei Torah* on the weekly Torah portion:**
[Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible](#)
- ***S'vara: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva***
Founded by JTS ordained Rabbi Benay Lappe, *S'vara* empowers queer and trans Jews to grow Jewish life through *Talmud* study: [S'vara](#)
- ***Shel Maala: A Digital-First, Queer Yeshiva***
Shel Maala aims to enable Jews to access joyful, raucous, soul-enlivening queer *Talmud* learning: [Shel Maala](#)

Halakhah (Jewish Law)/Ritual Practice

As a movement anchored in Jewish tradition, many will want to see how the guidance of our Conservative leaders helps inform the daily lives of queer people. Below are sources from the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) and other organizations:

- **CJLS Responsa and Papers**
 - *This responsum discusses various halakhic topics as related to transgender individuals:* [Transgender Jews and Halakhah \(Rabbi Leonard A. Sharzer, M.D.\)](#)
 - *This responsum presents a framework by which schools and communities can embrace queer individuals and couples:* [Homosexuality, Human Dignity & Halakhah: A Combined Responsum for the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards \(Rabbis Elliot N. Dorff, Daniel S. Nevins & Avram I. Reisner\)](#)
 - *This CJLS paper presents a model by which queer couples can be married within a halakhic framework:* [Rituals and Documents of Marriage and Divorce For Same-Sex Couples \(Rabbis Elliot Dorff, Daniel Nevins, and Avram Reisner\)](#)
- **The *Teshuva*-Writing Collective**
The Teshuva-Writing Collective of the Trans Halakha Project at SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva responds to questions of halakhah by and for trans Jews:
[Teshuva-Writing Collective](#)
- **“Towards *Halakhic Euphoria*” by Laynie Solomon**
In this essay, SVARA's Associate Rosh Yeshiva argues for an approach to halakhah that does not seek to “allow” queer people “to fit in,” but one that helps people affirm and celebrate their lives: [Toward Halakhic Euphoria](#)

- **Rising Tide Open Waters Mikveh Network**
This network develops communities of mikva'ot that are open and inclusive to the wide diversity of human experience, including queer and trans Jews:
[Rising Tide Open Waters Mikveh Network](#)
- **Kavod v'Nichum: Support for Inclusive End-of-Life Rituals**
Kavod v'Nichum supports inclusive principles and procedures in Jewish end-of-life rituals and practices. Scroll down to click on "Toward a Gender Inclusive Hevra Kadisha," a document from the Community Hevra Kadisha of Greater Boston.
[Gender Inclusivity in the Chevra Kadisha](#)

Shabbat Dinners and Other Programming

Shabbat dinners, whether at the synagogue, other institutional space, or at home, have always been traditional vehicles for welcoming and inclusion. You might consider promoting such meals, whether in conjunction with your community's LGBTQ+ Pride events, or at some other point in your calendar. Whether a large gathering in your building or at members' homes, the following resources from The Open Table may be useful:

- **On hosting:**
[Hosting a Pride Shabbat with Joy, Action, and Community](#)
- **On queering Shabbat table rituals:**
[QueerShabbat: A OneTable Supplement](#)
- **On encouraging meaningful table talk at dinner:**
[Table Talk with Pride!](#)
- **Shabbat Table Guides:**
[OneTable x JQI Pride Shabbat Guide](#)
[OneTable + The Lesbian Bar Project Shabbat Guide](#)
- **Shabbat Activities:**
[Embodying Pride Shabbat](#)
- **Shabbat Bingo Activity:**
[Pride BINGO](#)
- **Some recipes to enhance your Shabbat tables:**
[Taste the Rainbow: 10 Rainbow Recipes](#)
- **Shabbat Playlist from One Table and Spotify:**
[Pride Shabbat Playlist](#)
- **Conservative Movement's Pride Guide:**
[Rainbow Ready](#)

Rabbinical Assembly Resolutions

The Rabbinical Assembly, our Conservative Movement's organization of rabbis, prepares *teshuvot* [legal opinions] that can address welcoming and inclusion issues from a *halachic* perspective. They also prepare and vote on resolutions that are not *halachic* at heart; rather they often emerge from ethical considerations and concerns of social justice.

- **Condemnation of Conversion Therapy:**
[2020 RA Resolution on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Change Efforts | The Rabbinical Assembly](#)
- **Affirmation of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People:**
[2016 RA Resolution Affirming the Rights of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People | The Rabbinical Assembly](#)
- **In solidarity with the International LGBTQ+ Community:**
[2014 RA Resolution in Solidarity with the International LGBT Community | The Rabbinical Assembly](#)
- **Support of equal rights and LGBTQ+ inclusion:**
[2011 RA Resolution in Support of Equal Rights and Inclusion for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, And Transgender \(GLBT\) Persons | The Rabbinical Assembly](#)

Ongoing and Further Action:

As you begin/continue the holy work of welcoming, it is important that LGBTQ+ persons are an active part of your process. This will help to ensure that your work is useful and meaningful to the very people you are trying to serve.

Whatever initial steps you are anticipating or have already done, we encourage you to think about long-term actions that create a culture of welcoming and inclusion. For example, you might consider an ongoing study group that uses any of the materials in the Torah Learning and Halakhah/Ritual Practice sections above. In addition, your community might consider these options:

- **Shivyon Project**
Started in conjunction with the USCJ, Keshet's Shivyon Project is a year-long project of training, consultation, and learning that helps build or support an LGBTQ+ equality working group. Might your community participate?
[Shivyon Equality Project](#)
- **The Women's League for Conservative Judaism and the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs**
The WLCJ and the FJMC have joined together for an inclusion initiative. Might your Women's League group and Men's Club chapter participate?
[Joint WLCJ-FJMC Inclusion Initiative](#)

- **The Jewish Education Project**
The Jewish Education Project offers an array of material in their Pride Month Collection to help educators promote learning and conversation among their students. Might your school benefit from these materials?
[LGBTQ Pride Month Collection | The Jewish Educator Portal](#)
- **On Allyship—Becoming a Supporter of LGBTQ+ Jews (from the Blue Dove Foundation):**
[Using Jewish Values to Become a Better Ally](#)
- **On *Derech Eretz* [respect, civility] and Inclusion of LGBTQ+ Jews (from the Blue Dove Foundation):**
This item could be a good way to open discussion. Developed for teens; suitable for all.
[Taking "Pride" in Derech Eretz - The Blue Dove Foundation](#)

Inclusion Checklists

Whether we are just beginning the process of thinking through how to affirm and celebrate LGBTQ+ Jews, or have been doing this work for some time, reviewing basic checklists is always useful. Here are several:

- ***Find out where you are on the inclusion ladder (from Keshet):***
[Institutional Self-Assessment](#)
- **This guide from Keshet gives quick tips and information on creating a fully inclusive community where everyone can feel seen, heard, and whole:**
[A Quick Guide for LGBTQ Inclusion](#)
- **This guide from Keshet will help you create forms and applications that utilize LGBTQ inclusive language:**
[A Guide to Creating LGBTQ-Inclusive Forms](#)
- **This guide, from Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, was produced for Jewish college students. The editor-in-chief, D’ror Chankin-Gould, is now an RA member serving at Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago.**
[The Hillel LGBTQ Resource Guide](#)
- ***This guide is from Thrive: The Jewish Coalition to Address Trans and LGBTQ+ Youth, a partnership between Keshet and SOJOURN (The Southern Jewish Resource Network for Gender and Sexual Diversity). It can be used to facilitate group discussion around addressing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation:***
[Community Roles Activity - Thrive](#)

Organizational Support

You can find a lot of resources and support from national, regional, or local LGBTQ+ organizations to assist you and your community on this journey toward inclusion. The following list includes those organizations that offer resources and support from a Jewish perspective.

- **New York area:** [Out at the J](#)
- **Los Angeles area:** [JQ International](#)
- **Southern US:** [Sojourn](#)
- **National:**
 - [Keshet](#)
 - [Moving Traditions](#)
- **Israel:** [The Aguda](#)
- **Camp:** [Camp Havaya](#)

Inclusion Mission (and Welcoming) Statements:

Since many first know our communities by visiting our websites, it's becoming increasingly important that our online presence (and use of social media) represent our inclusive nature. Many organizations and synagogues today have placed their official Mission Statements on their websites. Others present Welcoming Statements that may not be officially carved out but nonetheless represent a community's values. Here we include a sampling of some who have gone above and beyond the generic welcoming of everyone to specifically name the welcoming of LGBTQ+ Jews, and even lay out what "welcoming" means.

- **Adath Jeshurun Congregation (Minnetonka, MN):**
[Keruv](#) (and scroll down for further resources)
- **Anshe Emet Synagogue (Chicago, IL):**
[Welcome](#) (see links on promise of inclusion and commitment to LGBTQ+ Jews)
- **Beth Hillel B'nai Emunah (Wilmette, IL):**
[LGBTQ+](#)
- **Beth Sholom Synagogue (Memphis, TN):**
[Accessibility & Inclusion](#)
- **Congregation Ohr Shalom (Summit, NJ):**
[LGBTQIA FAMILIES](#)
- **Etz Hayim Congregation (Arlington, VA):**
[Vision](#)
- **Orangetown Jewish Center (Orangeburg, NY):**
[OJC Pride](#)

Invitation to Making This a More Useful and Responsive Guide

You can help us build on this initial effort by sending us your ideas, additional resources, etc. If you have suggestions regarding adapting or changing this document, please send them to:

YachadQueerResourceGuide@gmail.com.