

Dear Friends,

On Friday night, December 4, I presented the following sermon over Zoom. While my initial intention in writing this sermon was to respond to the disturbing rape of Dinah that is nestled in the middle of the Torah portion (Genesis 34 of the portion, *Vayishlach*), it turned out to be much more than just that.

As you will see, I offered a particularly personal message that evening. I know that people are busy, but as a father who loves his children deeply, I would take it as a personal favor if every member of our JCNWJ family, whether you were with us on December 4 or not, were to become fully aware of the message I gave that night. For those who prefer, you can find a video of the sermon by clicking **HERE** <https://www.dropbox.com/s/b18l27zxkxdip1l/12-04-2020%20--%20VaYishlach%20Zoom%20Video%20-%20Transgender.mp4?dl=0> . And then, after you've read or listened to the sermon that I delivered almost a month ago, I ask that you please continue on to my very important addendum that follows. It was written just yesterday, almost four weeks after I first delivered the sermon.

Parashat Vayishlach
December 4, 2020
Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey
Rabbi Dr. Andy Dubin



As a boy coming of age in 1970s & '80s NYC, certain lessons were drilled into my young mind about what it means to be a real man.

1. Having a mother who works outside the home is both common and to be supported;
2. Being less skilled at science or math than a girl classmate is no reason not to be her friend
3. Real men definitely eat quiche

These lessons were all pretty easy for me to take in, because in my case, all three were definitely true.

But there were other lessons, too, lessons that were not quite so obvious, not because I wasn't capable of learning them, but because the society in which I was growing up never seemed all that interested in emphasizing – or even admitting – them. Specifically, as it relates to this week's Torah portion, (*Vayishlach*, which includes the disturbing rape of Dinah in Genesis 34), one thing I never fully appreciated until I was already married and the father of two teenaged girls is that I could never claim to be a real man until I had opened my eyes to the reality that, contrary to popular opinion, the society in which I lived actually *condoned* violence against women. It's not that I had to accept I was committing violence against women, because I wasn't, but unless I were willing to take a clear look at reality, unless I were willing to look with open eyes and accept that, according to CDC statistics from 2017 (the most recent on record), almost half of all women in the United States, 43.6%, had “experienced some form of contact sexual violence in their lifetime, with 4.7% of women experiencing this violence in the 12 months preceding the survey,” or that more than “1 in 5 (21.3% or an estimated 25.5 million) [had] reported completed or attempted rape at some point in their lifetime,” I would never be able to stand up and be a real man, because being a real man requires that we survey our horizons and do all we can to make sure that such pandemic injustice is eradicated. This mandate, by the way, applies to anyone wishing to be counted as a fully mature human being, man or not.

Recognizing how painful this topic has been for the girls and women in my life, the clearest point of view that I can offer, of course, is my own.

Embarrassingly, even though I always knew that men have clear advantage in our societal structure, and even though I always knew that women have to be that much better just to achieve the same level of success as their male counterparts, I am also guilty of discounting reports of aggression told to me by even the most important women in my life.

As Student Cantor Noa will concur, over the years, when the women and girls closest to me would share how awful it feels to be catcalled – or much much worse – my response has always been to believe them . . . but also to dismiss the experience. My go-to advice – as if I were being asked for advice in the first place – has always been to just ignore it and move on. That is, my contribution has always been to say, in effect, “I'm sorry that happened to you, but that's just life. The best thing you can do is remain silent.” I've always meant well, but in retrospect, I'm embarrassed by the inadequacy of my response.

No, I have not been guilty of committing violence against women, or at least I don't think I have, but neither have I been sufficiently forceful in my actions. How many of us have? Merely refraining from exacerbating injustice has been insufficient. Merely keeping my nose down and walking my own straight and narrow path has not been enough. The fact is, *none* of us who is in position to reverse the injustice of violence against women, even if only ever so slightly, is off the hook until we've made the effort, no matter what our own gender may be, because, as John

Stuart Mill wrote over 150 years ago, “Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing.”

Keep in mind that when I say violence against women demands rectification, it is violence against *all* women that must be righted, not just violence against cisgender women, that is, those whose female identity corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth. After all, as horrific as the statistics are for cisgender women, they are even worse for transgender women, for people whose female identity does not correspond to their sex assigned at birth.

Fifteen days ago, Alphonso David, President of the Human Rights Campaign of the LGBTQ advocacy organization, Human Rights Watch, wrote:

“This year . . . [with at least 37 cases,] the Human Rights Campaign has recorded the most deaths of transgender and gender non-conforming people of any year since we began tracking this violence [in 2013] . . . Divisive and dehumanizing rhetoric from anti-equality political leaders has contributed to the toxic mix of racism, sexism and transphobia that drives this horrific violence. It’s on all of us to fight for change at every level and take action to support trans and gender non-conforming people. We must work to dismantle the stigma that so many in the trans and gender non-conforming community face, and bring this violence to an end.”¹

That was November 19. By November 23, just 4 days later, with the murder of Chae’ Meshia Simms in Richmond, Virginia, the number had already risen by roughly 10%, to at least 40 transgender or gender non-conforming murders in the United States so far in 2020. Please note that Human Rights Watch is careful to say, “at least 40,” because all too often these crimes go unreported. The actual number was likely a good deal higher.

Of course, violence against transgender people goes well beyond the physical. As appalling as the statistics on transgender murder may be, the level of emotional and economic abuse is significantly more prevalent. According to the 2015 US Transgender Survey² in which the National Center for Transgender Equality managed to poll just shy of 28,000 transgender people in America:

“54% of those who were out or perceived as transgender in K–12 had been verbally harassed, nearly one-quarter (24%) had been physically attacked, and 13% had been sexually assaulted in K–12 because of being transgender, and 17% had faced such severe

¹ <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/marking-the-deadliest-year-on-record-hrc-releases-report-on-violence-against-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-people>

² <https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS-Executive-Summary-Dec17.pdf>

mistreatment as a transgender person that they left a K–12 school. • Nearly one-quarter (24%) of people who were out or perceived as transgender in college or vocational school had been verbally, physically, or sexually harassed.”

The unemployment rate among respondents was 15%, three times higher than the overall 5% unemployment rate in the United States. 30% of respondents who had a job in the past year reported being fired, denied a promotion, or experiencing some other form of mistreatment related to their gender identity or expression, and an overwhelming 77% of respondents who had a job in the past year took steps to avoid mistreatment in the workplace, such as hiding or delaying their gender transition or quitting their job.

Nearly one-quarter (23%) of respondents experienced some form of housing discrimination in the past year, such as being evicted from their home or denied a home or apartment because of being transgender. • Nearly one-third (30%) of respondents had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. • [and] More than one-quarter (26%) of those who experienced homelessness in the past year avoided staying in a shelter because they feared being mistreated as a transgender person . . . Seven out of ten (70%) respondents who [did] stay in a shelter in the past year reported some form of mistreatment, including being harassed, sexually or physically assaulted, or kicked out because of being transgender.

As a result of all this, and so much more, 39% of respondents reported having experienced serious psychological distress in the month before completing the survey compared with only 5% of the U.S. population. • 40% had attempted suicide in their lifetime, nearly nine times the rate in the U.S. population of 4.6%, and 7% had attempted suicide in the past year—nearly twelve times the rate in the U.S. population of 0.6%

This has to stop. We can no longer continue behaving as if so long as we’re not adding to the problem, we’re not part of the problem – because we are. So long as we continue to accept the status quo as unchangeable, transgender people will never live with the acceptance and dignity to which every child of God is entitled. Anyone, including myself, who has the capacity to chip away at the inequity, but fails to do so, is culpable of perpetuating a system in which too many of us are irrelevant . . . or worse.

One final word about the trans community in general. So far, I’ve defined transgender simply as those whose gender identity does not match the sex assigned at birth, which includes people who identify female but were assigned male at birth, and those who identify male but were assigned female at birth, but in reality, transgender includes so many more than just these two groups. Again, according to Human Rights Watch:

“Some trans people identify as trans men or trans women, while others may describe themselves as non-binary, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, agender, bigender or other identities that

reflect their personal experience. Some . . . take hormones or have surgery as part of [their] transition, while others may change [their] pronouns or appearance. Roughly three-quarters of trans youth that responded to a H[uman] R[ights] C[ampaign] Foundation and University of Connecticut survey identified with terms other than strictly “boy” or “girl.”³

Which brings me to the last and most portion of my message tonight. Now, before I get there, let me say, unequivocally, that I recognize some stories are mine to tell, and some are not. Before I share this particularly story, which actually isn’t much of a story at all, let me say that I tell it not only with permission, but at the urging of my child and your student cantor, Noa, whose story it is.

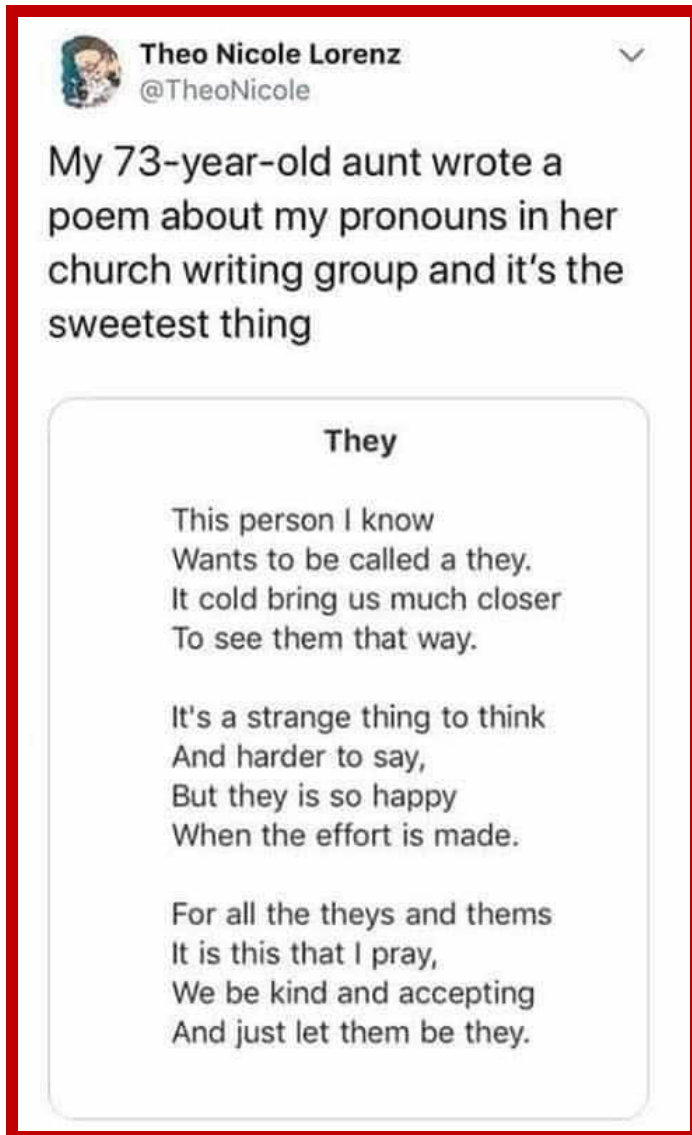
Yes, Noa includes themselves among the ¾ of trans youth who identify with terms other than “boy” or “girl.” As Noa tells me, while their public statement of gender non-binary identification is relatively new, the inner feelings of identifying as neither strictly girl or boy have existed for quite some time.

To be clear, the point of my sharing this this is not to shock – because statistics show there’s truly nothing shocking about people identifying as non-binary – but rather to let Noa be their true self, because Noa deserves that, and you all deserve to know how to speak to and with Noa with respect.

Fortunately, it’s not rocket science. In fact, it’s very simple: Because Noa does not identify as a girl or a boy, the proper pronouns to use when talking about Noa is “they” or “them,” depending on context. The pronouns of “she,” “her,” & “hers” that we’ve all been using until now for Noa are no longer relevant, and should be retired permanently. Amazingly, that really is all there is to it. Yes, it’s that simple. Mind you, though, “simple” is hardly “easy.” Mistakes will happen. Guaranteed. I’ve been at it for about two months now, and I still make mistakes. Almost 19 years of habit is hard to reverse overnight. So when you do refer to them out of habit as “she,” this is no reason to beat yourself up. Noa will not be offended. Their father won’t be offended either, because the only thing that truly matters is that you maintain an open and loving heart, one that is amenable to respectful correction.

There’s been a poem making its way around Facebook lately. Perhaps you’ve seen it:

³ <https://www.hrc.org/resources/understanding-the-transgender-community>



Noa is a lucky kid, because even though statistics are so challenging for transgender people, it is true also that for those who live in accepting communities with loving families, the challenges are greatly reduced.

Last week I shared with you a number of reasons I am grateful to the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey. Tonight I share with you one more, and it is huge: Just like the 73-year old aunt of the Facebook poem, this community loves my child unconditionally. And because of that, I know that even if it feels strange at first, there will indeed be a conscious and heartfelt effort to speak to Noa with the language and treat them with the love that Noa deserves. For this reason, I know this community will have every right to consider itself as part of the solution to the status quo of unjust violence that has discolored our world, starting at least as far back as Dina in tonight's Torah portion and continuing all the way through Chae' Meshia Simms, just about ten days ago. And since we know it's not going to stop with her, I am grateful in the knowledge that you all

will do your own part when it comes to Noa in actively making this a safer and more loving world for all.

Shabbat Shalom

ADDENDUM: Since this sermon was delivered about a month ago, Noa's story has continued to unfold. Because they have a clear connection to their birth name as being feminine (notwithstanding it's aural ambiguity for English speakers), which does not correspond to their non-binary identity, Noa has taken a new name. From this time forward, the proper first name to use when speaking with or referring to your student cantor is Rayn (pronounced: *rain*). Their birth name by which you used to know them is no longer relevant, nor appropriate for use, because it no longer refers to who your student cantor is. Rather, their birth name has become what is known in the LGBTQ community as their "dead name," to be retired forever. Of course, just as it is with Rayn's pronouns, so too will it be with their name. That is, mistakes will happen. This is fully expected. So please understand that self-castigation is both unnecessary and misplaced when the wrong name inevitably slips from your mouth. All I ask, as your rabbi, of course, but principally as Rayn's father, is that you just put your heart in the right place and try. So long as you keep trying, eventually, I promise, their name will become the only name that comes to mind when you speak with or about Student Cantor Rayn Dubin.

I recognize this is a new way of thinking for many of us, but I also recognize that the JCNWJ community is one that cares profoundly about treating every child of God with deep honor and respect. Therefore, I imagine some of you will want to understand more about how to support Rayn, or anybody else whom you know that is transgender. By clicking **HERE** <https://www.keshetonline.org/resources/how-to-support-someone-whos-trans-and-just-came-out-to-you/>, you will be brought to a simple guide called, "*How to Support Someone Who's Trans and Just Came Out to You*," which was prepared by *Keshet*, the premier Jewish LGBTQ advocacy organization in America. Of course, if you want to understand LGBTQ concerns in greater depth than that, please do not hesitate to reach out, either for more learning resources or just to talk.

Wishing everyone an easier 2021 than we had in 2020, a year in which every one of us will live our lives in the fullest, most authentic ways imaginable,

Rabbi Dubin