

Interview With a Transsexual Within the Orthodox Jewish Community

Names have been changed to protect identities. Associated Press standards have been followed in referring to people by their gender of choice.

The Observer: What sex were you at birth?

Yonina: At birth, I was male. At this time, I still am operating under such appearances, as I only recently began the transition process, and not many people are aware of my situation yet.

The Observer: At what age did you feel that you were in truth a member of the opposite sex?

Yonina: My earliest memories have me realizing that I was really a girl. I remember one point when I must have been either four or five years old that I really felt that I was in the wrong body. From that moment on, there were few times that the feelings did not constantly invade my thoughts.

The Observer: Did you tell anyone of this feeling/ what were the responses to your attempt to do so?

Yonina: Not until I told my wife that I was having dreams about being a woman. At that time, we were married about a little more than a year (we are coming up to 10 years of marriage now in just a few months), and things were getting to me. I never honestly thought I would find a need to transition. I thought that I may have been able to “get over it” and live a normal life, which is why I didn’t think I walked into my marriage in any deceptive manner, etc. When I finally told my wife, she was confused what it was that I was dealing with, and it wasn’t until a few years later that things really started getting worse in terms of dangerous actions on my part that she made me see my first therapist. Finally, for some reason I am still not sure of, I told my parents in November/December of last year, and they were quite concerned – they helped me find my current therapist (#3), and understand what I’m going through, and are somewhat supportive, though they will not stop at anything to keep me in the way they have known for all these years.

The Observer: What Jewish affiliation do you currently have, if any? What affiliation did you have at birth?

Yonina: FFB [frum from birth], and still the same.



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The Observer: Would you say that becoming transsexual/ becoming a member of the opposite gender is a choice?

Yonina: I wish I could say it's a choice! Realizing that you have a body that does not fit with what your mind expects to find is a big problem. It has caused me much emotional harm and suffering over many years, and has cost me a tremendous amount – in just about every manner you can expect; financially – it is incredibly expensive to be transgendered/transsexual, as the costs of the medications (hormones, etc) are quite high and there are many things I need to do to feminize my body such as hair removal, etc. It has also cost me emotionally, spiritually, physically and so many other ways all in their own way, as you can probably imagine. When I finally do make the full transition, I will have probably spent close to \$50,000 just to become the woman I know I am supposed to be. That is not cheap, and is certainly not a choice.

The Observer: If it is a choice, why would one choose to do so? If it is not, how would you describe it?

Yonina: The easiest way to describe the feelings that I have is by saying that if one morning you woke up and realized you had been transformed into a man, but your mind and heart know you are a woman, you would not feel comfortable in your new body. You would try and understand what happened, and why HaShem [God] made that curse come about. I am sure that there are those in the TS community that would say being trans is not necessarily a curse, but possibly a bracha [blessing.] To me, it is a curse, and I have to deal with the consequences of it every day of my life. I have two young children and a wife who I absolutely adore. I cannot see living without them, and I know that by transitioning, there are certain issues I will be thrusting upon them at such a young age, that I only hope they will be able to cope with. How can I tell my daughter that all men are not like me – that she can feel comfortable that the man she will fall in love with and decide to build a home with will not do the same thing that I feel I must do to my wife? How can I tell my son that I am not the typical male role model he will need growing up? It's horrible. There is no other way to describe being trans other than being a curse or punishment from HaShem for doing something at some point. There is also biological evidence that this is not something of one's choosing, as the hormones that wash over the fetus early in pregnancy carry the TS condition, and the only question is to what degree the individual will feel disconnected during their lifetime, and to what extremes they will go to correct the condition.

The Observer: What was your experience with the Jewish community before, during and after the process of becoming a member of the opposite gender?

Yonina: As I mentioned, I have not yet fully transitioned. There are a few areas that are becoming different about me at the moment, but I am not yet out in the real world as a woman 24/7. I have gone out on many occasions as a woman, and will continue to do so in order to



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allow me to really live. I need the interaction and emotional connection of being a woman to keep myself sane. Being locked up in a way that keeps me living male while I know I am female is the root cause of much of my depression spells, and I get out of the ruts by going out as a woman. Living in a very large Jewish community (where many YU families happen to be), I know that my timing and places I go must be carefully selected and planned so as to minimize the risk of being seen and identified – not so much for me, but for my wife and children. I am not ready to put them through such scrutiny yet, but know that will be around the corner soon.

The Observer: How would you like/ have liked the Jewish community to have reacted to your new status? What could the Jewish community have done/ do to be more supportive?

Yonina: The Jewish community is very odd and divisive. As the old joke goes – put two Jews in one room, and you have three opinions, you can see how the Jewish community can be so crazy. There are those Rabbis that are so against the idea of “trans” that they will say anything they can in the negative about the individuals being faced with this condition. Then there are those Rabbis who are understanding, and know that it is not by choice that someone is trans, but are in need of transitioning and becoming a member of the opposite gender due to *pikuach nefesh* [danger to life] reasons. For those that don’t understand, I only wish they can live one day in our bodies and let them really see what it is like having the condition and needing to make choices all the time as to how to stay alive. I don’t think anyone really wants to kill themselves – they are driven to suicide because the society or the rules one is forced to live by don’t fit that individual’s needs. I know I value life too much to kill myself, but prior to beginning on hormones, I had too many thoughts of suicide and of committing other dangerous actions on my body that when I explained to my *rav* what my situation was, he told me transitioning was necessary for me!

The Observer: What do you feel the role of halakha [Jewish law] is when it comes to dealing with issues of transsexuality? Do you believe it is permissible to take hormones/ have SRS per halakha?

Yonina: As I mentioned above, for *pikuach nefesh* reasons, just about anything is permitted. If I were going to end up on the wrong end of a noose, or with a sliced wrist, etc, I don’t think that any *rav* would say it is better to die than to transition and take hormones/SRS, etc. The rabbis will say that one should pray more, learn more, do more “spiritual” activities to keep one’s mind from being inundated with their being trans, but the truth is that no matter how much one does, and prays to HaShem that they become “normal,” it is simply not going to happen. Thankfully HaShem put the ability to transition into this world to save those individuals who do have these issues, and one must take them to avoid committing even worse acts, such as suicide.



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The Observer: If you are comfortable telling me about your family status, religious education, whether you have children, how they have been accepted into their schools (especially if religious) or where you are located (generally), I would be most interested in any of that information.

Yonina: I live in the northern part of New Jersey, and attended both MTA & YC. Even though I was transgendered the whole time, I knew that I had to be an amazing actress to avoid anyone else being able to see anything was wrong. Even my parents had no idea anything was up until I told them, and when they saw my therapist and learned that what I had was in fact reality, rather than some fantasy or something, they knew it was real. I have still not told my two children (both under six years old) anything about my condition, and am not sure that the school where one of my children are at would be very friendly to my situation, though I happen to know the principal for many years and how much weight an old friendship may have, I have no idea, but would hope I have some value at least.

The Observer: Any other relevant comments?

Yonina: As I think I mentioned, nobody ever sets out to be a member of the opposite gender just because. And the people who take the steps to alter their bodies to truly become a member of the opposite gender are acting out of desperation, rather than excitement and joy. Even cross-dressers are transgendered to an extent. Early on in my exploration and understanding of my condition, I remember thinking to myself that if I were only gay, things would have been better – at least everyone would still know me as the person I was born as, and I can choose more of how I live that I can now. I also imagined many other situations where I could have been different, so as to avoid being trans and wishing that those situations may have been present instead of my transgendered/transsexuality issues. There were countless nights during my teenage years and beyond that I literally cried myself to sleep because of the pains I was feeling and the constant prayers that I would awake the following morning and be a girl. To this day, I know that even with surgery, I will not be a true woman – I can never bear children the way a woman would, etc. During high school, I was heavily depressed, which caused my weight to balloon. As a result, I was often made fun of, with the other boys saying I was pregnant. The amount of anguish this caused me EVERY TIME they said that to me – not because I was concerned about my weight, but because I knew I could not become pregnant, was enough to push me over the brink. How many women who cannot bear children due to whatever condition they may have would want to be called pregnant – how psychologically dangerous is that? I was never able to tell anyone of my pain because I didn't want to disappoint anyone. I was never able to share my suffering or find an outlet to relieve my pain during my youth, which I feel robbed of today.



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