



JEWISH QUEER ANCESTORS

THE STORY OF BEN ROSENSTEIN Z"l PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION GUIDE

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 **Shomer**
COLLECTIVE

This resource was created as part of the Educator Fellowship, which was generously supported by The Covenant Foundation.

A decorative collage featuring various elements: a large pink flower with a dark center in the top left; a sprig of purple lavender in the top center; a stack of brown paper envelopes tied with twine in the top right; a purple pansy in the middle right; a green leafy branch in the bottom right; a stack of old envelopes with stamps and twine in the bottom left; and a yellow pansy in the bottom right. The background is a light blue sky with soft white stars.

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LEARNING GOALS:

- Explore themes of LGBTQ+ ancestry and queer Jewish lineages.
- Learn the story of Ben Rosenstein z”l as a case study for honoring queer ancestors.
- Understand challenges around dignity in death for queer people.
- Learn Jewish tools for fostering dignity in death for queer people.

This guide assumes prior knowledge of LGBTQ+ terms and concepts and Jewish death practices. If you would like a refresher on trans identities, please consult Keshet’s Terminology page and Trans Misconceptions and Facts. Don’t hesitate to reach out to education@keshetonline.org with any questions!

CONTENT NOTE:

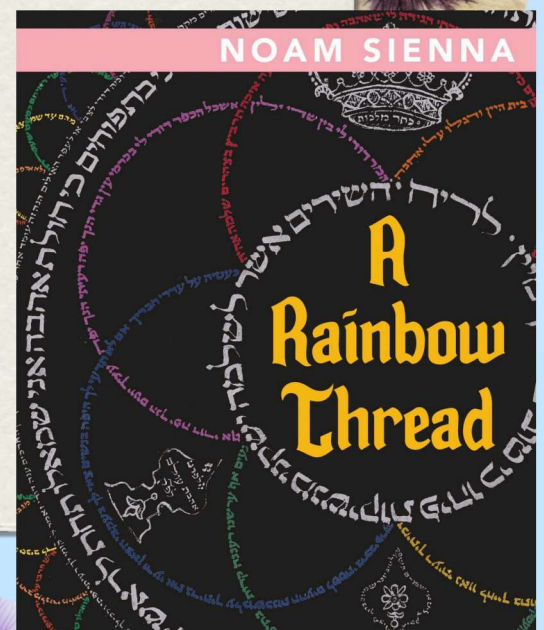
The ways that people in the early twentieth century speak about queer folks include a range of affirming and othering language. Viewers are advised to watch with care, and to know that all gender identities are deserving of dignity, regardless of how they were described in the past.



FRAMING BEFORE WATCHING THE VIDEO:

The story of Ben Rosenstein z”l is found in Dr. Noam Sienna’s **A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century To 1969**. Two of the texts in this book are Chicago Tribune articles from 1915, covering Ben Rosenstein’s death.

We will learn about Ben’s life, and we will also hear of several ritual practices for caring for the sick and for honoring the dead. Listen out for these acts of respect, and for the missed opportunities to honor the dead.



AN ANTHOLOGY OF QUEER JEWISH TEXTS
FROM THE FIRST CENTURY TO 1969

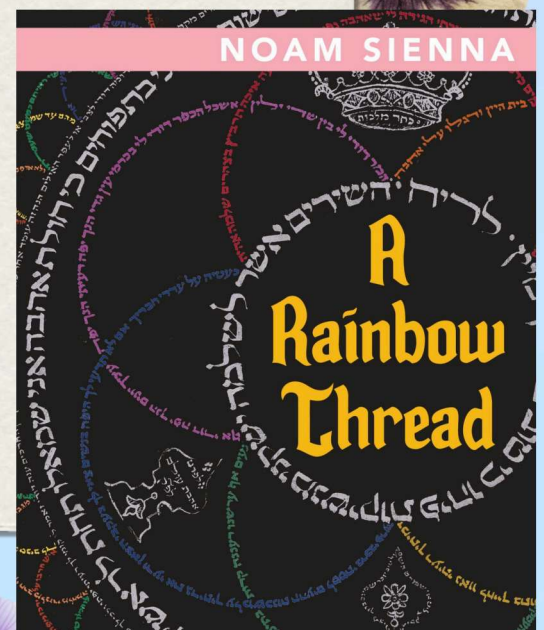


ADDITIONAL FRAMING BEFORE WATCHING THE VIDEO:


In his introduction, Sienna writes:

“...[This book] does not prove that this or that historical figure was actually lesbian or trans - an anachronistic attempt to say, ‘Look! There were [insert-identity-here] Jews in the past!’

Instead, this book is intended to do something both **deeper and more expansively imaginative**. The purpose of this book is to push the reader to **re-think what queer Judaism could be**, and to encourage them to take a second look at what they assumed they knew about how Jews thought and talked about sexuality and gender over our long history as a people.” (p4)

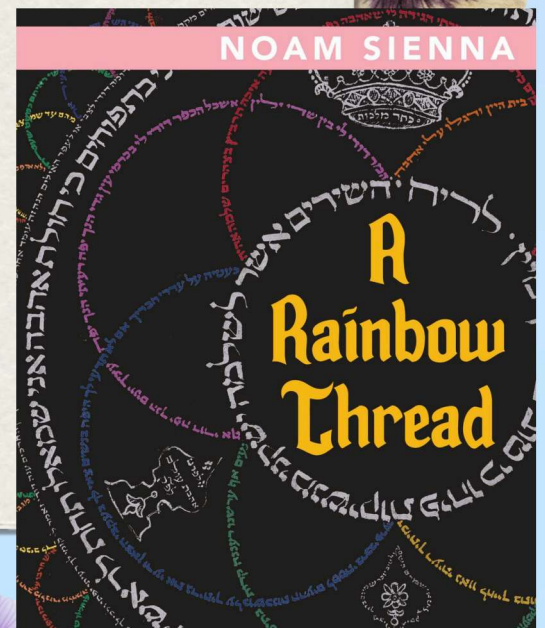


AN ANTHOLOGY OF QUEER JEWISH TEXTS
FROM THE FIRST CENTURY TO 1969



This video offers the same opening and challenge to viewers. When watching the video, try to avoid the impulse to label Ben with specific identities. **From our twenty-first century vantage point, we do not know how Ben would have identified.**

As Sienna writes, “The historical phenomenon of people who were raised as women but who live partly or completely as men presents numerous interpretive complexities. In some cases, it seems clear that these individuals understood themselves to be men in every way; in other cases, it seems that their intention was to pursue marriage or partnership with women; and in yet other cases, their life as a man opened new professional, economic, and social opportunities.” (p123)



WATCH VIDEO:

The video player interface is centered on a light brown, lined paper background. The title "JEWISH QUEER ANCESTORS" is displayed in large, colorful, stylized letters: "JEWISH" in yellow, "QUEER" in red, and "ANCESTORS" in purple. Below the title, the subtitle "THE STORY OF BEN ROSENSTEIN Z"L" is written in a smaller, dark purple font. The video player controls at the bottom include a play button, a progress bar, the time "0:06 / 10:22", a volume icon, and a full-screen icon. The entire scene is decorated with dried flowers, including purple lavender, pink and purple pansies, and blue and yellow pansies, along with stacks of old, tied envelopes and a green leafy branch.



**AFTER WATCHING THE VIDEO,
BEFORE IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION:**


Invite a breath.

Seeing the stories of our ancestors can bring up a range of feelings and emotions.

Perhaps you feel connected to or distant from the past.

Perhaps you feel relief/anger/joy/confusion/gratitude/a mix of emotions hearing Ben's story. Perhaps you are thinking of your own legacies of queerness in your life, families, and communities. Perhaps you have ongoing curiosities and questions.

All of these responses (and more) are welcome. Take a minute to sit with and honor them before moving on.



The background features a light blue sky with a white sunburst and a faint silhouette of a person. On the left, there are purple and white pansies. On the right, there are dried, pressed flowers. The central text is on a white, rounded rectangular page with a hole-punch edge on the left side, set against a light blue background with a white sunburst.

POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION PROMPTS

PART 1: LGBTQ+ ANCESTORS

The bottom of the page features a light blue background with a white sunburst. On the left, there are green leaves. On the right, there are several brown envelopes tied with twine, some with handwritten text and a circular stamp.

1. WHAT MAKES AN LGBTQ+ ANCESTOR?

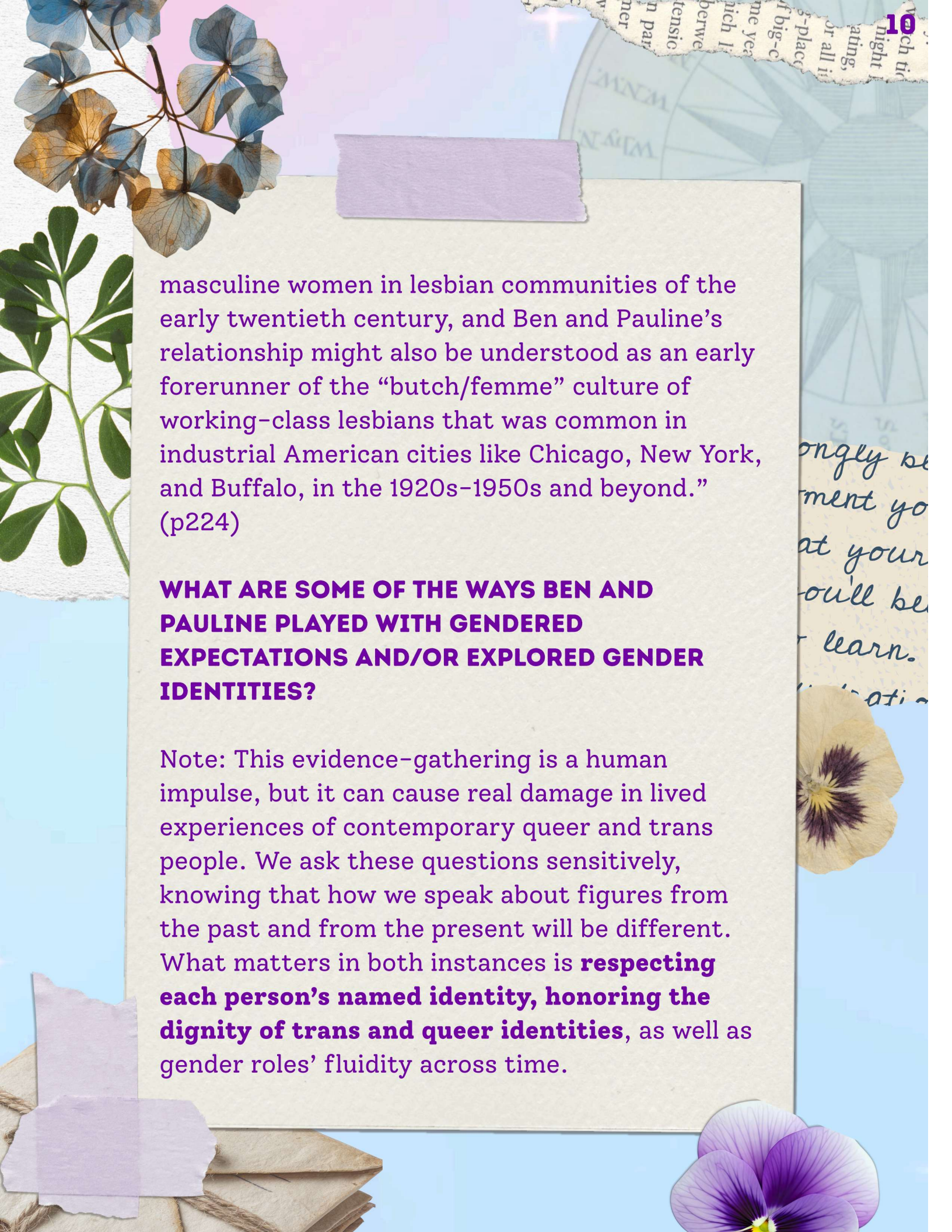
Many LGBTQ+ people feel a yearning to see ourselves in a history that often erases us. Sienna writes: “The significance of this book resides in its **recovery of a lineage** which has been denied and withheld from the people who have sought it. History is important for everyone, but it takes on a special importance when evidence of one’s very existence has been manipulated and censored, forgotten, buried, and destroyed. This is particularly true for queer Jews and others with doubly- and multiply-marginalized identities who so often must fight for recognition and legitimacy on many fronts, both inside and outside the various communities to which they belong. Unfortunately, these efforts at erasure are frequently successful. Even today, queer Jewish individuals can feel like they are the first and only of their kind. One way to fight this feeling is by **building horizontal connections across space through activism and education - to find companions and comrades, and to help individuals and communities know that they are not alone.** This book offers another resource, by **creating connections across time: to feel connected to a legacy, to a history, and to both a past and a future.** (p3-4)



2. ARE BEN AND PAULINE LGBTQ+ ANCESTORS?

Sienna writes of the challenge knowing how our ancestors would have described themselves: “The historical phenomenon of people who were raised as women but who live partly or completely as men presents **numerous interpretive complexities**. In some cases, it seems clear that these individuals understood themselves to be men in every way; in other cases, it seems that their intention was to pursue marriage or partnership with women; and in yet other cases, their life as a man opened new professional, economic, and social opportunities.” (p123)

“...It is difficult to know exactly how to interpret the story of Ben Rosenstein; based on the surviving records, it seems most appropriate to use his chosen name and pronouns... His own testimony – such as his refusal of a women’s sanitarium, and his wish to be buried in his suit – suggests that he was sincere and serious about his masculine identity (and his commitment to Pauline). At the same time some aspects of Ben’s identity are paralleled by the presence of



masculine women in lesbian communities of the early twentieth century, and Ben and Pauline's relationship might also be understood as an early forerunner of the "butch/femme" culture of working-class lesbians that was common in industrial American cities like Chicago, New York, and Buffalo, in the 1920s-1950s and beyond." (p224)


WHAT ARE SOME OF THE WAYS BEN AND PAULINE PLAYED WITH GENDERED EXPECTATIONS AND/OR EXPLORED GENDER IDENTITIES?

Note: This evidence-gathering is a human impulse, but it can cause real damage in lived experiences of contemporary queer and trans people. We ask these questions sensitively, knowing that how we speak about figures from the past and from the present will be different. What matters in both instances is **respecting each person's named identity, honoring the dignity of trans and queer identities**, as well as gender roles' fluidity across time.

3. COMPARE BEN'S EXPERIENCE TO THAT OF LESLIE FEINBERG, AN AMERICAN BUTCH LESBIAN AND TRANSGENDER ACTIVIST.

In hir book *Trans Liberation*, from hir essay "Allow Me to Introduce Myself," ze writes:

"While there is as yet no language for who I have become, I articulate my gender – silent to the ear, but thunderous to the eye. And that is what determines the depth and breadth of the oppression I battle on the streets virtually every minute of every day. That is the truth of my life that cannot be answered by the simplistic question: Are you a man or a woman? Yet radio and television interviewers still repeat the same questions to me again and again. "But were you born male or female? Why do you think you are the way you are? Were you born this way? Was your mother overbearing? Did your father want a boy?" These questions have no meaning for me. **I don't think the point is: Why are we different? Why have we refused to walk one of two narrow paths, but instead demanded the right to blaze our own?** The question is not why we were unwilling to conform even when being beaten to the ground by ridicule and brutality.



The real burning question is: How did we ever find the courage? From what underground spring did we draw our pride? How did each of us make our way in life, without a single familiar star in the night sky to guide us, to this room where we have at last found others like ourselves? And after so much of ourselves has been injured, or left behind as expendable ballast, many of us worry "What do we have left to give each other? Upon what basis will we build something lasting between us?" **I think we have a whole world to give back to each other.**" (p33-34)

- **WHAT ARE THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BEN AND LESLIE'S EXPERIENCES? HOW WERE THEIR SOCIOCULTURAL LANDSCAPES SIMILAR OR DIFFERENT?**
- **AS QUEER PEOPLE, WHERE DO WE FIND COURAGE? WHO OR WHAT IS OUR "UNDERGROUND SPRING [FROM WHICH] WE DRAW OUR PRIDE?"**

The background features a light blue sky with a white sunburst and a faint silhouette of a person. On the left, there are purple and white pansies. On the right, there are dried, pressed flowers. The central text is on a white, rounded rectangular page with a yellow border and a hole-punch effect on the left side. The text is in bold, sans-serif fonts.

**POST-VIDEO
DISCUSSION
PROMPTS**

**PART 2: DIGNITY IN
DEATH FOR QUEER
PEOPLE**

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1. WHAT ARE SOME JEWISH CUSTOMS, RITUALS, OR ACTS OF RESPECT FOR HONORING THE DEAD, AS SEEN IN THE VIDEO, AND BEYOND?

2. IN BEN'S STORY, ARE THERE WAYS IN WHICH HE WAS DISHONORED IN HIS DEATH? EVEN WITHOUT CLARITY AROUND HIS SPECIFIC IDENTITY, WHERE IS THERE POTENTIAL FOR DISHONORING OR MISGENDERING THE DEAD IN JEWISH PRACTICE?

3. HOW CAN DEATH WORKERS AFFIRM LGBTQ+ IDENTITIES?

4. WHY MIGHT THE ANSHE EMET COMMUNITY HAVE CHOSEN THE PSALM 118 QUOTATION FOR BEN'S HEADSTONE?

אָבן מַאָסוּ הַבּוֹנִים הָיְתָה לְרֵאשׁ פִּנָּה.

Even ma'asu habonim hayitah lerosh pinah.

A stone cast away by builders became a cornerstone.

6. READ MILLER OBERMAN'S POEM, TAHARAH (2019):

I'm wondering about you, chevra kadisha,
the "holy society," who will prepare my body,
once I'm no longer in it, for the earth.

Will you know me already, or see me for the first time
as you wash and shroud me, as my father was washed
and dressed in simple white tachrichim, for those

about to stand before God. Perhaps by then I'll know
if I believe in God. I like the democratic
nature of the shroud, an equalizing garment. You

may see a body that surprises you. You may not have
seen

a man's body like this one before you, which I hope is
very old,
wrinkled, and (since I'm wishing) fit, muscled

as much as an old man can be. You'll see scars.
Ragged dog bit forearm, elbow my father picked gravel
from over the sink, then flushed with foaming iodine,

and the long double horizons on my chest, which
trunked my body

like a tree. If I am unexpected, let me not seem grotesque to you, as I have to many people, perhaps

even my own parents, and others whose highest kindness was to say nothing. Please let me return to dust in peace, as the others did, and recite those beautiful psalms,

remembering, as you go about your holy ritual, how frightening it is to be naked before another, at the mercy of a stranger's eyes, without even any breath.

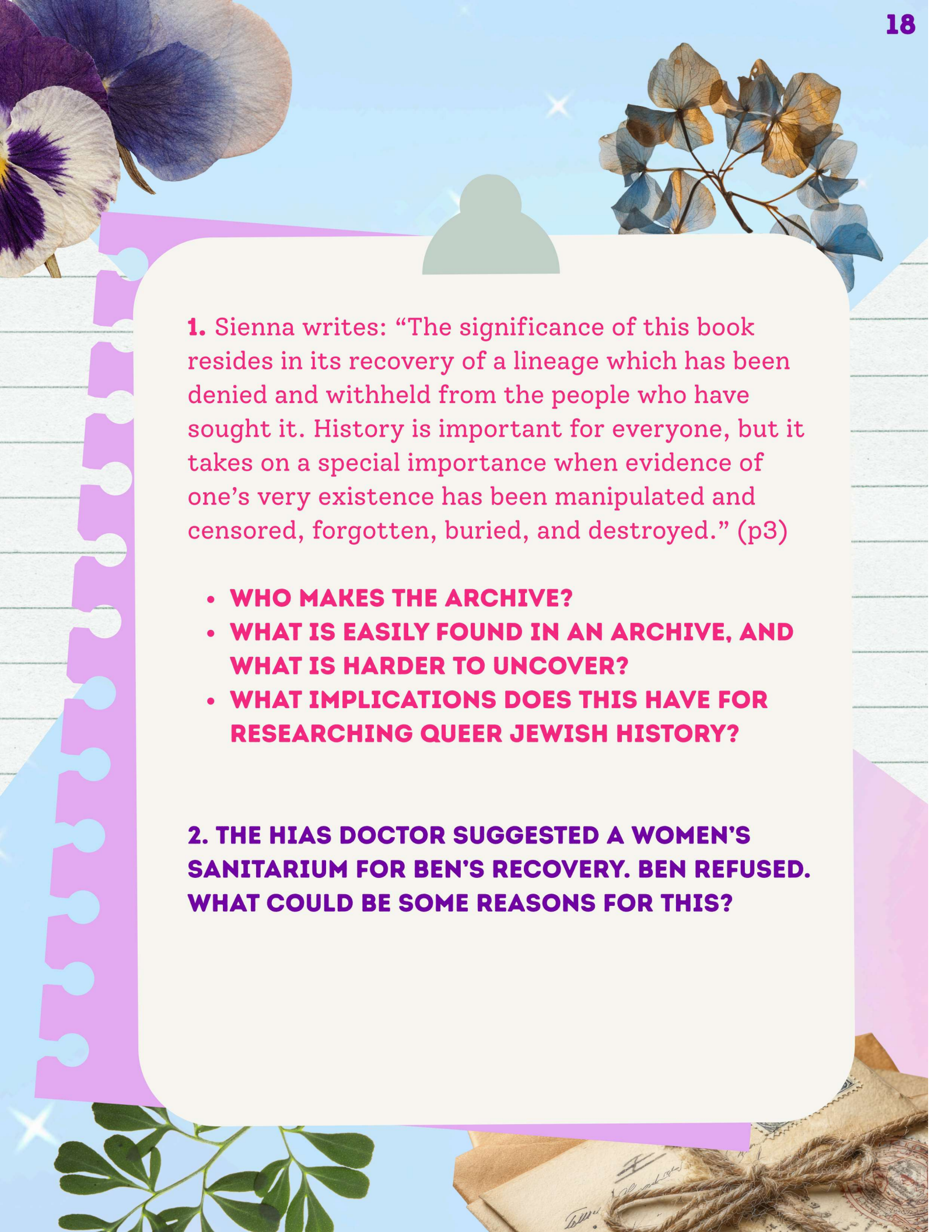
- **WHAT JEWISH RITUAL PRACTICES ARE DESCRIBED IN THE POEM?**
- **WHAT WOULD DIGNITY IN DEATH FOR A QUEER PERSON LOOK LIKE FOR THIS AUTHOR?**

The background features a light blue sky with white clouds and a person silhouette. On the left, there are purple and white pansies. On the right, there are dried blue hydrangea leaves. The central text is on a white notebook page with a yellow binding on the left side. The text is in bold, sans-serif fonts. The top section is in blue, and the bottom section is in purple.

**POST-VIDEO
DISCUSSION
PROMPTS**

**OPTIONAL
ADDITIONAL
QUESTIONS**

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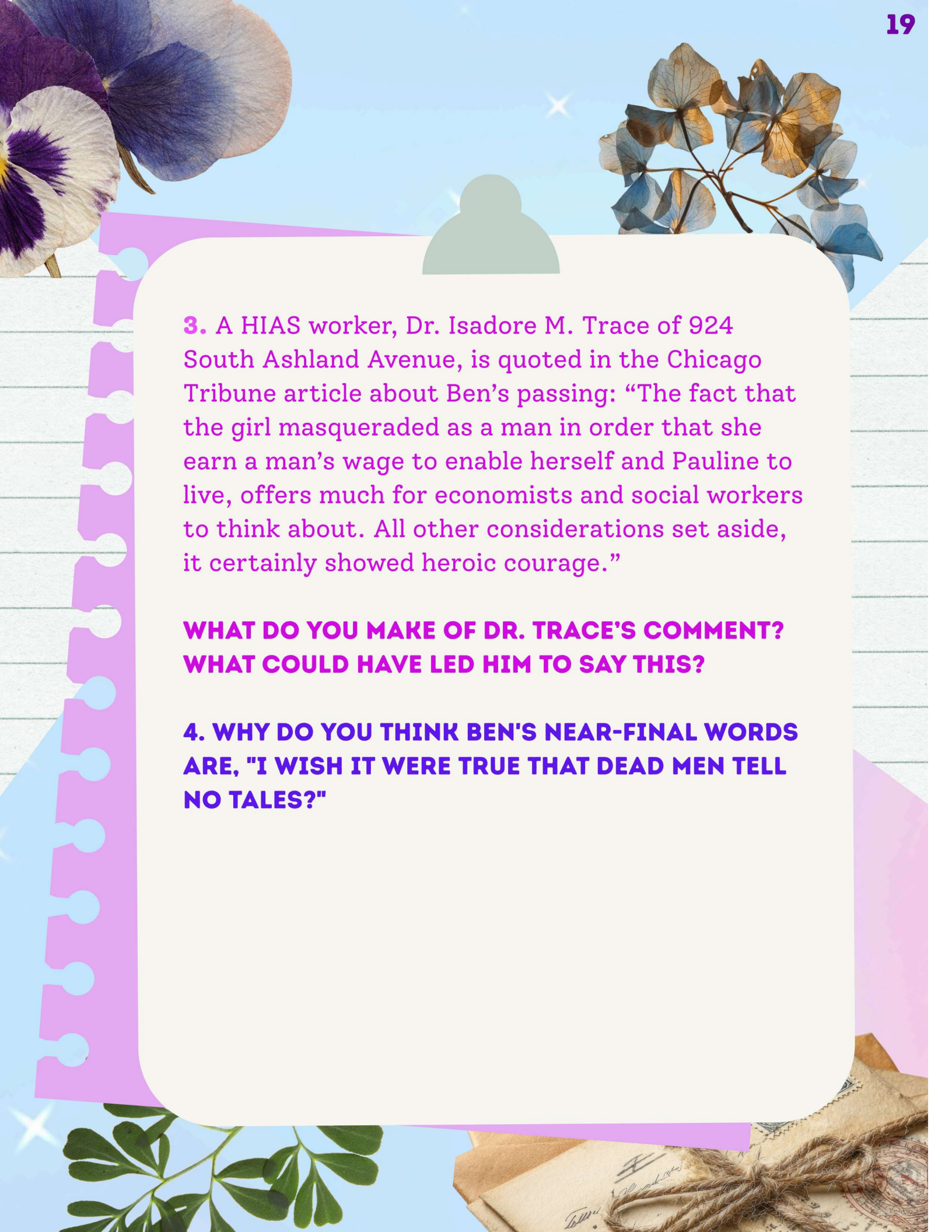


1. Sienna writes: “The significance of this book resides in its recovery of a lineage which has been denied and withheld from the people who have sought it. History is important for everyone, but it takes on a special importance when evidence of one’s very existence has been manipulated and censored, forgotten, buried, and destroyed.” (p3)

- **WHO MAKES THE ARCHIVE?**
- **WHAT IS EASILY FOUND IN AN ARCHIVE, AND WHAT IS HARDER TO UNCOVER?**
- **WHAT IMPLICATIONS DOES THIS HAVE FOR RESEARCHING QUEER JEWISH HISTORY?**

2. THE HIAS DOCTOR SUGGESTED A WOMEN’S SANITARIUM FOR BEN’S RECOVERY. BEN REFUSED. WHAT COULD BE SOME REASONS FOR THIS?





3. A HIAS worker, Dr. Isadore M. Trace of 924 South Ashland Avenue, is quoted in the Chicago Tribune article about Ben's passing: "The fact that the girl masqueraded as a man in order that she earn a man's wage to enable herself and Pauline to live, offers much for economists and social workers to think about. All other considerations set aside, it certainly showed heroic courage."

**WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF DR. TRACE'S COMMENT?
WHAT COULD HAVE LED HIM TO SAY THIS?**

4. WHY DO YOU THINK BEN'S NEAR-FINAL WORDS ARE, "I WISH IT WERE TRUE THAT DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES?"

**IN HONOR OF QUEER JEWISH
ANCESTORS, KNOWN AND UNKNOWN**

זיכרונם לברכה

**ZICHRONAM LIVRACHA
MAY THEIR MEMORIES BE A BLESSING**



SOURCES

- Noam Sienna; [A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century To 1969](#) (2019)
- Chicago Daily Tribune: [Death Reveals Girl “Wed” Girl to Fight Want](#). February 8, 1915.
- Chicago Daily Tribune: [Dress, Not Suit, Will Be Shroud](#). February 9, 1915.
- [Digital Transgender Archive](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Community Hevra Kadisha of Greater Boston; [Toward a Gender-Inclusive Hevra Kadisha](#) (2020)
- Feinberg, Leslie; [Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Marsha P. Johnson and Beyond](#) (1997)
- Feinberg, Leslie; [Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue](#) (1998)
- Jewish Book Council; [Queer Identity in Jewish History: An Interview with Noam Sienna](#) (2019)
- The Order of the Good Death; [Trans Death Rights Are Human Rights](#) (2020)
- Queer Funeral Guide; [A Funeral Guide for Queer People, and Those Who Support Them](#) (2019)
- Sharman, Zena; [We Have the Power to Reimagine How We Die and How We Mourn; Xtra](#) (2023)
- Shomer Collective's [Jewish End of Life Rituals Glossary](#)



For more Jewish wisdom and resources on death and dying, visit www.shomercollective.org.



For more resources on LGBTQ+ equality and belonging in Jewish life, visit www.keshetonline.org



For LGBTQ+ equality in Jewish life

