



# JEWISH QUEER ANCESTORS

## THE STORY OF BEN ROSENSTEIN Z"l FACILITATOR DISCUSSION GUIDE

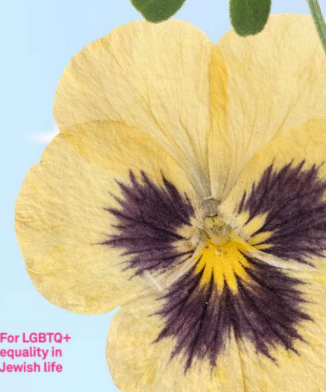
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For LGBTQ+ equality in Jewish life





## CONTENTS:

Learning Goals.....	1
Content Note.....	1
Framing Before Watching the Video.....	2
Watch Video.....	5
After Watching the Video.....	6
Post-Video Discussion Prompts	
Part 1: LGBTQ+ Ancestors.....	7
Part 2: Dignity in Death for Queer People.....	13
Optional Additional Questions.....	17
In Honor of Queer Jewish Ancestors.....	20
Sources Cited.....	21
Additional Resources.....	22



### 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](mailto:education@keshetonline.org) with any questions!

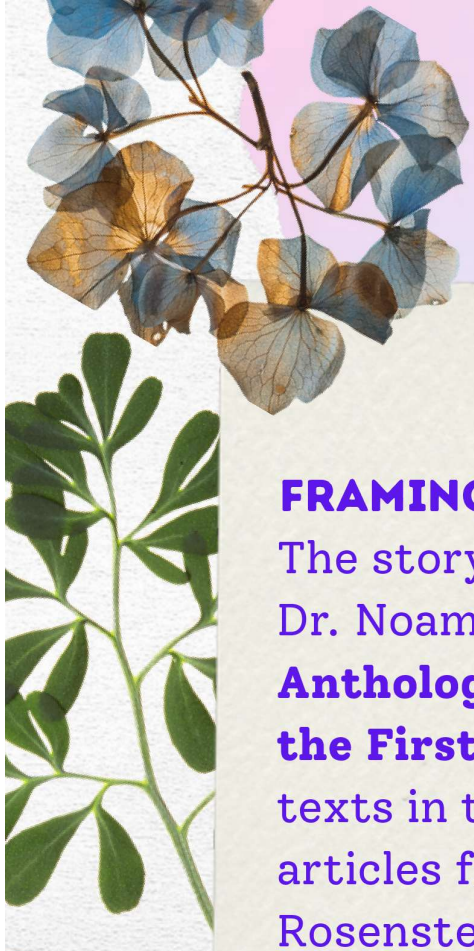
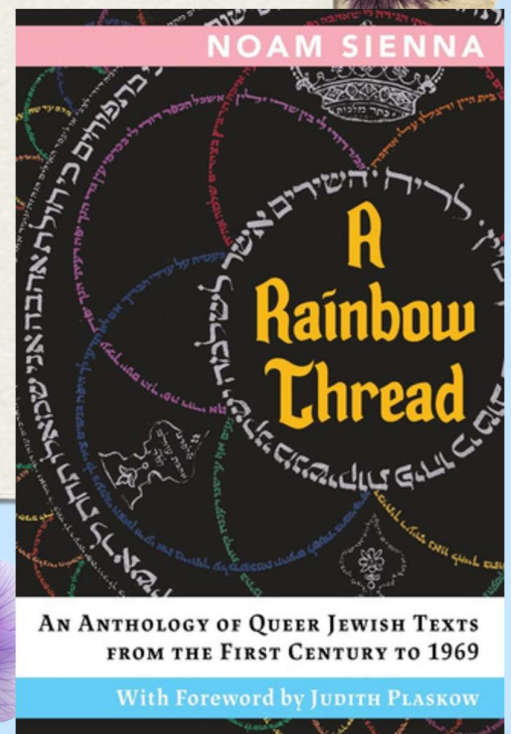
### CONTENT NOTE:

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.



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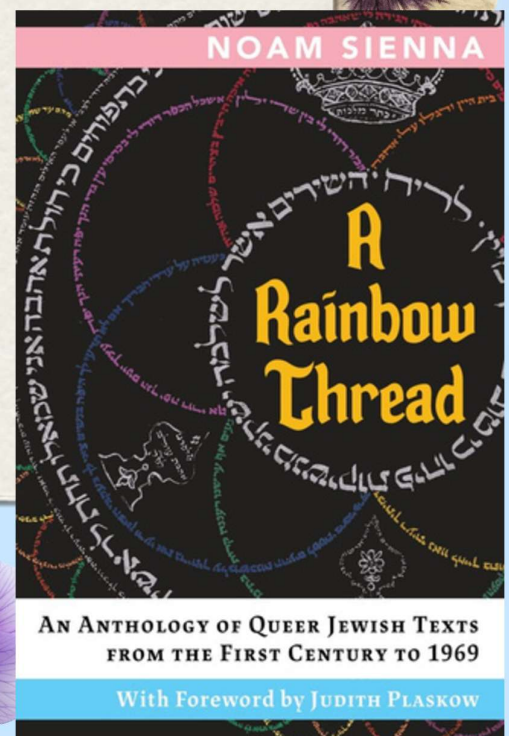



**ADDITIONAL FRAMING BEFORE  
WATCHING THE VIDEO:**

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!’

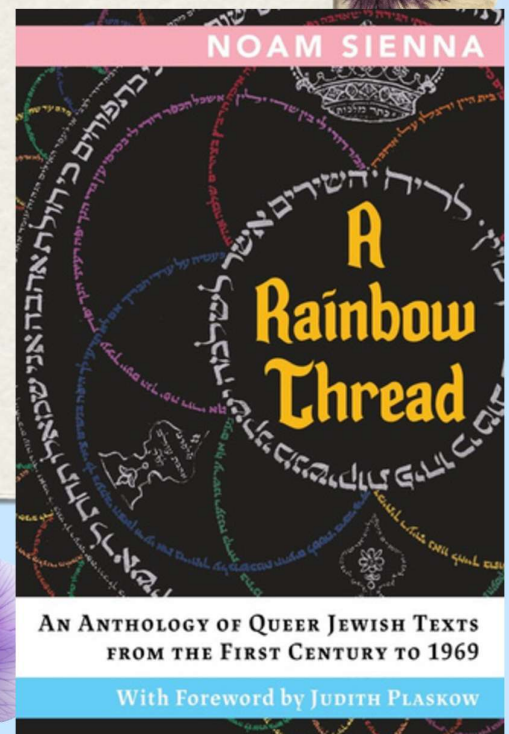
Instead, this book is intended to do something both **deeper and more expansively imaginative**. The purpose of this book is to push the reader to **re-think what queer Judaism could be**, and to encourage them to take a second look at what they assumed they knew about how Jews thought and talked about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





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 features a vibrant, multi-colored background with a grid pattern. The title "QUEER JEWISH ANCESTORS" is displayed in large, stylized, multi-colored letters. Below the title, the subtitle "THE STORY OF BEN ROSENSTEIN Z"L" is shown in a smaller, dark font. The player includes a play button, a progress bar, and a timestamp of 0:06 / 10:22. There are also icons for volume and full screen.





**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.

**Facilitator:** Would anyone like to share what they are feeling, or what is coming up?



The background features a light blue sky with a white sunburst in the top left. In the top left corner, there are purple and white pansies. In the top right, there are dried, pressed flowers in shades of blue and brown. A grey silhouette of a person is positioned at the top center, appearing to hold a white, rounded rectangular card. The card has a yellow-orange border on the left side with a series of white circular punch holes. The card is placed over a white, lined notebook page. At the bottom, there are green succulent-like plants on the left and a stack of old, brown envelopes tied with twine on the right.

# **POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION PROMPTS**

## **PART 1: LGBTQ+ ANCESTORS**

## 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.

## **FACILITATOR NOTES:**

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

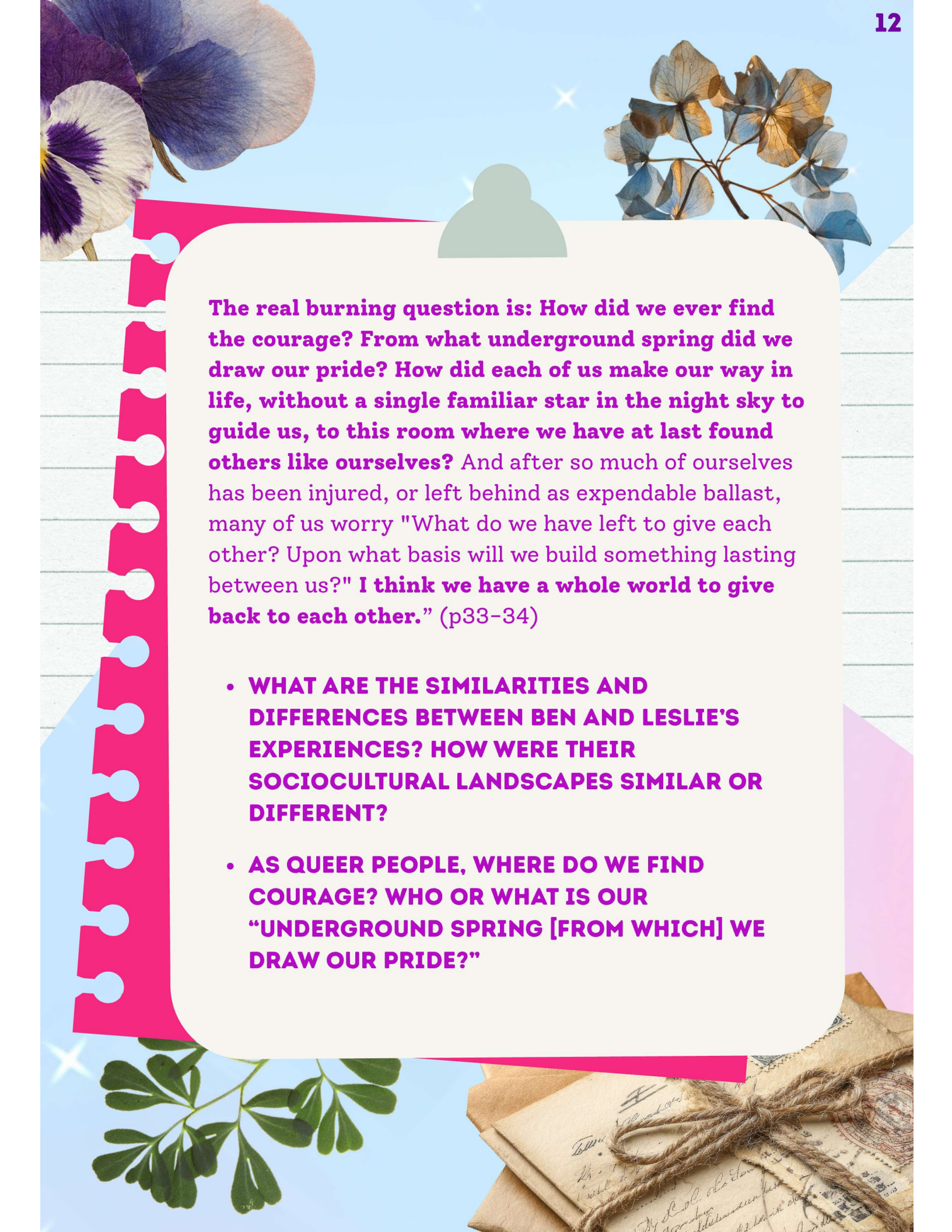
- Ben changed his gender presentation through clothing and hair.
- Ben changed his name and pronouns. He is referred to in official documents (the census, HIAS documentation) by this name and these pronouns.
- Pauline referred to Ben sometimes with “he/him” pronouns and sometimes with “she/her,” sometimes as “Bennie” and sometimes as “Ida.”
- Ben took Pauline’s last name when they married. It is rare for a woman’s last name to become the family name, even today!
- Ben chose work in male-dominated settings, like furniture factories.
- Ben was able to access male-dominated social settings, such as pool rooms and saloons.

- Ben and Pauline lived a life together in New York, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago, traveling and seeing theatre together.
- Ben refused to be placed in a women's sanitarium during his illness.
- Ben asked to be buried in his first black suit, which he wore when he first began presenting as a man.
- As long as Jews have existed, we have lived with different relationship structures, different family structures, evolving rituals and customs, all of which bring queerness in and out of focus.
- Optional commentary about Ben's coworkers: Were they mocking his higher voice as a means of othering him ("you're different!") or affirming his masculine presentation through teasing camaraderie ("you're one of the boys, so we're roasting you")? Could there be another read on this behavior?

### 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 starburst in the upper right. In the top left, there are purple and white pansies. In the top right, there are dried, pressed flowers in shades of blue and brown. A grey silhouette of a person is positioned at the top center, appearing to hold a white, rounded rectangular card. The card has a yellow-orange border on the left side with a series of white circular punch holes. The card is placed over a white, lined notebook page. At the bottom left, there are green, feathery leaves. At the bottom right, there are several brown envelopes tied together with a piece of twine, some with handwritten text and a postmark.

# **POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION PROMPTS**

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

**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. IN WHAT WAYS 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 haytah lerosh pinah.

A stone cast away by builders became a cornerstone.

## FACILITATOR NOTES:

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

- Praying at the bedside of a dying person
- Recording the name of a meteh (the deceased), said aloud and/or written on a death certificate
- Headstone unveiling, placing smaller stones on headstones

Not shown in video:

- **Shomrim** (guards) are individuals who perform shmirah (watching), the Jewish tradition of accompanying the deceased from death until burial, ensuring the body is never left alone. This act of respect and companionship serves to comfort the soul, which is believed to be present, and offers comfort to the family.

- **Tahara:** The ritual preparation of the deceased for burial, involving washing and dressing the body, reading liturgy, and honoring the dignity and sacredness of human life.
- **Chevra Kadisha** ("Holy Society"): a Jewish organization/sacred burial society that ensures that deceased Jews are prepared for burial with dignity, according to Jewish law.
- **Kaddish:** A prayer said by mourners.
- **Kriah:** Tearing of a garment or ribbon by mourners.
- **Shiva:** Seven days during which mourners are visited at home by family and community, and participate in prayer services held at home.
- **Sheloshim:** The first 30 days of mourning, during which mourners return to their normal routine but refrain from many customary pleasurable activities.
- **Yahrtzeit:** Anniversary of a death

## **FACILITATOR NOTES:**

### **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?**

- On Ben's death certificate, he was listed under his birth name and described as single.
- Ben was buried in a pauper's grave in with no headstone.
- Ben's suit was burned on the doctor's orders, despite his request to be buried in it.

Newspaper articles covering Ben's death rely on sensationalist reporting:

- Ben's name is written in quotation marks, and he is often referred to by his given name, Ida. Even without clarity around his specific identity, this naming approach is different from respectful approaches to trans dignity today; using someone's deadname is disrespectful. Describing someone as a gender they no longer identify with may

cause harm through misgendering. The way Ben was described then is not how we would talk about him now.

- Ben and Pauline's marriage is called an "industrial union" and Ben is referred to as a "girl husband."
- Ben is described as having "broke[n] down under the burden of a man's work," implying that he was too weak to handle harder labor than women could "manage."
- One article's headline reads, "First dress in seven years will be a shroud."
- One reporter writes, "When the rabbi reads the Hebrew burial service he will say nothing about 'Ben Rosenstein' - the name Ida Weinstein assumed to help support her girl 'wife,' Pauline Rosenstein."

## **FACILITATOR NOTES:**

### **3. IN WHAT WAYS CAN DEATH WORKERS AFFIRM LGBTQ+ IDENTITIES?**

A death worker may hold one or several of the responsibilities below, sometimes in partnership with the loved ones of the meteh (deceased).

- Make choices that ensure kavod hameit (respect/honor for the dead) given each individual's context.
- Follow the wishes of the meteh. Having these wishes shared aloud or in writing while this person is alive ensures that they can be as wholly honored as possible. Be aware that beneficiaries (biofamily and/or chosen family) may have different expectations. Honor the meteh as best you can, using your knowledge of their lived experiences.
- Ensure a gendered tahara team based on the meteh's request, or following guidelines from Towards a Gender-Inclusive Hevra Kadisha. Ensure LGBTQ+-inclusive and -affirming training for the tahara team.

- Ensure tachrichim (burial shrouds) appropriate for the meteh's lived gender.
- Ensure pesukim (liturgy, verses etc) appropriate for the meteh's lived gender.
- Ensure that the funeral or memorial service follows the meteh's wishes, uses gender-affirming language, and celebrates who they were in life. Consult The Queer Funeral Guide or this Xtra blog post for more information.
- Ensure that a headstone reflects the name chosen by the meteh.
- Know the history of queerphobia in deathwork; there was a time of refusing tahara to LGBTQ+ people during the AIDS crisis, even once it was clear that HIV transmission was not possible through mere bodily contact.
- Consult resources such as The Order of the Good Death for additional best practices.

## FACILITATOR NOTES:

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

אָבן מֵאָסוּ הַבּוֹנִים הָיְתָה לְרֹאשׁ פִּנָּה.

Even ma'asu habonim haiytah lerosh pinah.

A stone cast away by builders became a cornerstone.

- This line is talking about the building of the Temple in Jerusalem; the builders had initially rejected a stone, considering it of inferior quality or appearance, but it later became the cornerstone, the most structurally essential and most visible part of the building.
- The Temple was the place of utmost honor and power as the site of worship in ancient Jewish life. A place of such significance is being referenced and reclaimed for someone who was once denied kavod hameit; queer identities once discarded are now being recognized as central to our community. We honor those today who were dishonored in the past.

- Centering and honoring one queer ancestor's memory creates space for all queer Jews (and all people) to find our place in history, to reclaim honor, to practice what it is to keep memory alive.
- Look at this line in the context of the rest of the Psalm. What do you notice about the lines around it? What are some themes of this Psalm? (Taking refuge in God in times of deep distress: another line of this Psalm reads, מְרַחֵם צָרָה קָרָאתִי יְיָ עֲנֵנִי בְּמַרְחָב יְיָ / Min hameitzar karati Yah; anani bamerchav Yah / In distress I called on Yah; Yah answered me and brought me relief.)

## 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?**



# **POST-VIDEO DISCUSSION PROMPTS**

## **OPTIONAL ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS**

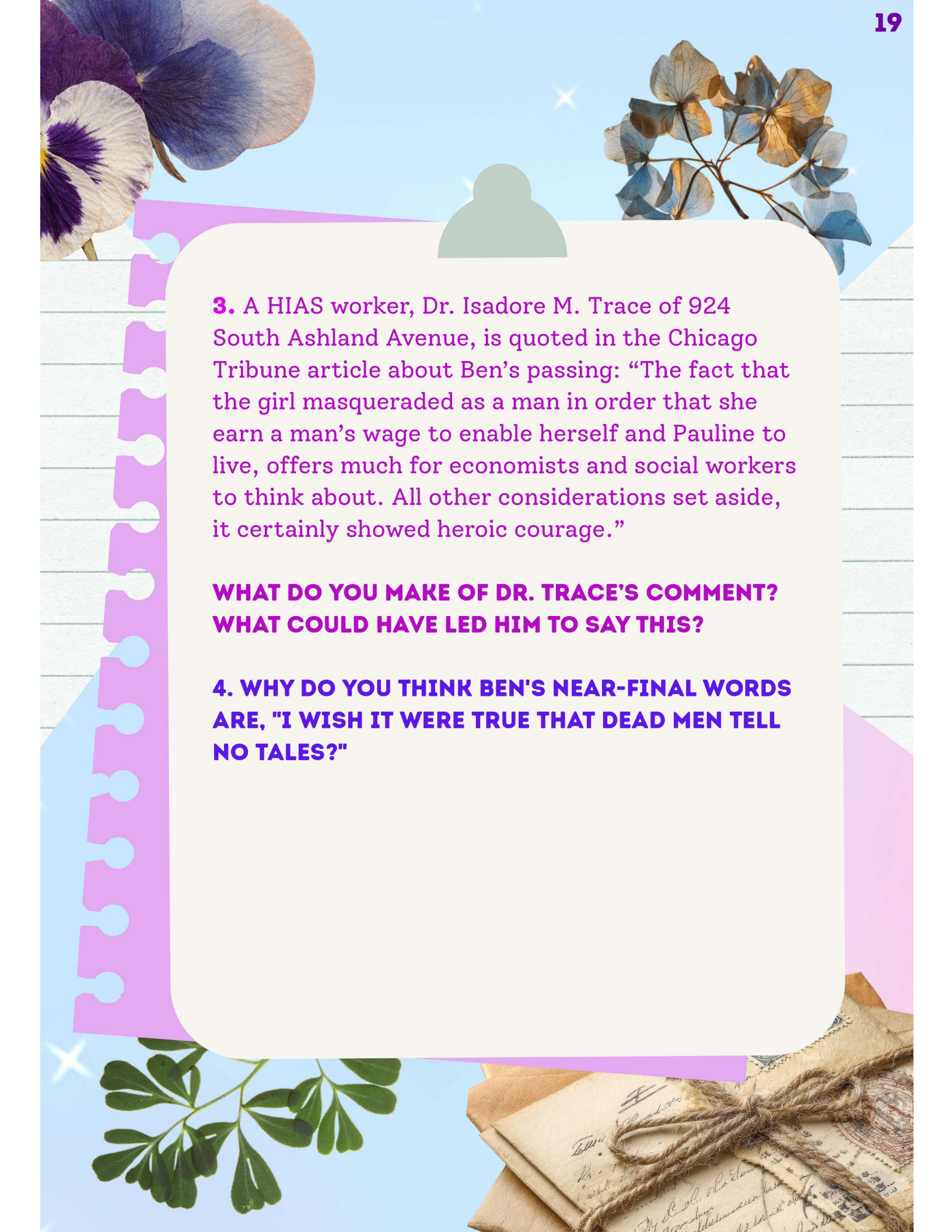


**1. Sienna writes: “The significance of this book resides in its recovery of a lineage which has been denied and withheld from the people who have sought it. History is important for everyone, but it takes on a special importance when evidence of one’s very existence has been manipulated and censored,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



For more resources on LGBTQ+ equality and  
belonging in Jewish life, visit  
[www.keshetonline.org](http://www.keshetonline.org)



For LGBTQ+  
equality in  
Jewish life