

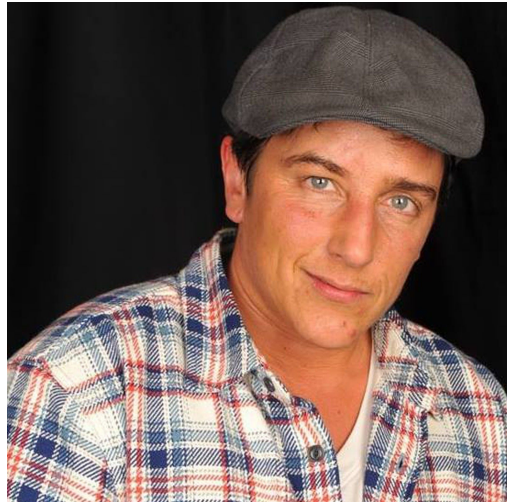
# How Liberal Jewish Values Inspire my Work

## Twilight People - Surat-Shaan Knan

*Surat-Shaan Knan is the LGBTQI+ Project Manager at Liberal Judaism.*

As actress and trans icon Laverne Cox once stated: "We still live in a binary world in which the idea is imposed on us that there are only two genders; we need to change that perception." Indeed, the "gender binary" tells us that there are two ways to live in this world: as a man or as a woman.

And the Abrahamic religions, headed by traditional Judaism, have certainly done their best to reinforce the binary gender system ever since 'Adam and Eve'. By the way, the male/female binary is not in any way the exclusive system of gender classification in traditional Judaism. Across our ancient texts we find a great number of references to sexes/genders other than male or female, Zachar/זָכָר, Nekeivah/נִקְבָּה, Androgynos/אַנְדְּרוֹגִינוֹס, Tumtum/טוּמְטוּם, Ay'lonit/אֵילוֹנִית or Ay'lonit/אֵילוֹנִית and Saris/סָרִיס. The ancient scribes may not have intended to liberate the Israelites from the gender binary, but I still find it comforting that there has always been a certain amount of recognition that diversity exists.



Ever since the so-called 'transgender tipping point', there is definitely more awareness – especially among the more progressive religious communities like Liberal Judaism – that for some individuals the gender they were assigned to at birth is not the right one. The common perception is that trans people have legal, medical and other interventions to live their life as the 'opposite gender'. Whilst this process may transgress the gender binary for a while, it tends to get reinstated once the individual has 'fully transitioned'. While all of these identities are extremely valid and true for many people, they do not capture the experiences of everyone – for example, those for whom the entire idea of only two options of gender is too restrictive. There are many gender identities and expressions that blur the gender binary or exist outside of it altogether: genderqueer, genderfluid, third gender, gender neutral, gender non-conforming, only to name a few. The same goes for sexual orientation: not everyone is either straight or gay. Some people identify as bi, queer, demisexual, asexual, polyamorous and so on. However, only too often these narratives are missing from our conversations about faith, gender and sexuality. Being a queer, gender nonconforming Progressive trans Jew myself, I have felt 'being left out' only too often.

LJ's Senior Rabbi & Chief Executive Danny Rich says that Liberal Judaism's mission is '*to be a voice for those who are usually unheard*', and so Liberal Judaism was always the perfect host for my initiatives.

I helped create and run LJ's pioneering oral history and archive projects Twilight People and Rainbow Jews. Both initiatives capture the 'hidden histories' of LGBTQI+ people of faith and have certainly added a sense of pride, health and well-being to many of our community

members and friends, including myself. I have seen our community transform and become a lot more inclusive and welcoming, and I'm sure the Rainbow Jews and Twilight People legacy has contributed to this.

Are we there yet? Certainly not. But I believe we Liberal Jews can work on this together:

I would envision a Planet TumTum: a world where humans are free to express and define themselves, and live and love how and whom they want to without being violated, questioned or forced to conform.

I would want to walk into a Jewish community space or synagogue and find an inclusive liturgy, gender-neutral facilities, and life-cycle event and rituals that can be adapted to suit everyone. My favourite idea is to create a BART Mitzvah! As you can see, there are more project ideas in the pipeline.