

GENDER BOXES

Time: 20 minutes

Materials: Large sheets of easel paper, markers, masking tape

Audience: All ages. Adjust discussion questions for age and developmental appropriateness.

GOAL: To examine the impact of rigid gender stereotypes on the development of individual gender identity and to increase participants understanding of the intersection between sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and gender policing. (Homophobia and transphobia are both consequences of and tools for reinforcing rigid gender roles.)

Take two large sheets of easel paper, and draw a large box in the center of each, leaving plenty of room to write or draw inside the box and outside of the box. At the top of one sheet, write "boys," and on the other, write "girls."

Break participants into two groups. (If you have a large number of participants, you can create several sets of box-sheets, and duplicate groups.) Give one group several markers of the same color, and give the other group a different color.

Give the following instructions:

"Inside of the box, I want you write or draw as many things that you can think of that most people in the world would say are 'appropriate' or 'okay' for the group listed on your sheet. Think of activities, toys, games, emotions, colors, ways of behaving, ways of expressing themselves, etc. The idea here isn't to write what you think is 'appropriate' or 'okay,' but what you think most people would say. Take five minutes and brainstorm as many as you can think of, and write all of them inside of the box. Don't write outside the boxes just yet."

Give participants five minutes to complete this activity.

When they've finished, ask them to trade sheets with the other group. Give the following instructions:

"Now you have the other group's sheet. Take a minute or two and read everything that the other group has written in the box about what they think most people would say is appropriate or okay for their population.

"Think about what happens to members of the population on the sheet that you're looking at now when they step outside of that box. What names do they get called? What might happen to them physically? Socially? Emotionally? In public? In private? Write everything that you can think of that is said to or that happens to people who step outside of the box in the area around the box on your paper. Take five minutes, and come up with as many ideas as you can."

Give participants five minutes to complete the activity. After they've finished the activity, ask participants to post their completed sheets on the wall. Ask participants to look at both (or all) of the sheets, and to identify the patterns, trends, and commonalities.

Some questions for discussion:

What did you notice? What do different groups of individuals have in common when they step outside of their socially-prescribed gender boxes?

How do young people and adults get messages about what's "okay" or "appropriate," and what's "not okay" or "inappropriate?" (Where in your life did you get some of those messages?)

What are some of the ways we react when we're told that we don't fit into our prescribed boxes?

What might be different about the responses within and outside of the boxes if we were talking about adults ("men" and "women") instead of children ("boys" and "girls")?

In your experience, what are some of the ways that Judaism reinforces the boundaries of these boxes? What are some of the ways that Judaism has fostered opportunities for you to transgress these boundaries?

What are some of the ways that you have lived inside of the box? What are some of the ways that you have stepped outside of the box?

How does the acceptance and reinforcement of these boxes impact both individuals and communities? Alternately, what is the impact of the destruction of the boundaries established by these boxes? Be sure to consider the negative and positive impacts of both.

If time allows, offer participants an opportunity to ask questions and/or make additional comments.