

Martina Navratilova and transgender

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Last week I allowed a careless error to evade my scrutiny when my blog accused the Jewish Week of being pro-Kahane. I had meant to say the Jewish Press. I must apologize unreservedly to the Jewish Week for the distress it will have caused its staff and readers.

In my younger days, Martina Navratilova was considered one of the very best female tennis players. She won 18 grand slam singles titles and 31 major women's doubles titles (an all-time record). Born in what was then Czechoslovakia, she eventually became an American citizen. After she came out as gay, she campaigned vociferously for gay rights. But recently she has become critical of trans women competing in women's sports.

For the uninitiated, or those of us who only knew male and female as the genders, let me give a little background. Trans women are people [designated male at birth](#) but are later reassigned as female. A trans man is someone designated as a [female at birth](#). And many trans men choose to undergo surgical or hormonal transition. A transgender person can also be [bisexual](#), [pansexual](#), [polysexual](#) or [asexual](#). Some even consider conventional sexual orientation labels inadequate or inapplicable to them.

Such is the fluid state of gender nowadays. And I have no argument with anyone wishing to designate himself or herself or any other self in any way at all. I deplore any discrimination or abuse that transgender people often have to endure. In a free society, we must respect differences regardless of whether it conforms to one's own value system.

Gender ambiguity has been recognized for thousands of years. The Talmud talks about hermaphrodites; the *Androginus* (which comes from the Greek Androganous) and *Tumtum*. The first refers to people who have both male and female organs at birth. The second is someone whose sexual organs were not developed or determinable. Both are treated with respect and dignity and are recognized as different categories of gender. They could participate in the normal civil and religious ceremonies of society. Rabbis discussed such issues as marriage and divorce both constructively and sympathetically.

But life is much more complicated nowadays. It is not just a matter of self-identification. For example, what if a man chooses to describe himself as a woman, is sent to jail, insists on going to a woman's jail for safety but, once there, rapes women. Or the fear that in a female toilet, a strong transgender person may take advantage of that strength to molest a female? Should we simply dismiss these as exceptions? Or is this a problem? Should we even bother to have separate toilets for different genders or one for all? Such questions are regarded as offensive to transgender people. Just as Western culture is now regarded as offensive by everyone who isn't white! Does this make sense?

In sport, it is now dangerous to raise such issues for fear of being shouted down and bullied by the loony left. And this is where Martina Navratilova comes in. She dared to ask a simple question: What happens if a man chooses to change gender to female, enters female competitions, wins all the prizes and then a few years later decides to switch back to where he or she was before? Is that fair?

This has, after all, happened last month in Connecticut where transgender athletes can compete in women's events without restrictions. Two of them, bigger and stronger than the others, got the prizes, the honors and the scholarships. And there is nothing to prevent them from changing back whenever they feel like it.

Following an article that Navratilova wrote for *The Times* in February 2019 which raised such issues, [Athlete Ally](#), an LGBTQ athlete advocacy group, removed Navratilova from their advisory board, stating her comments "are transphobic [and] based on a false understanding of science and data"

In March 2019, Navratilova apologized for using the term "cheating" when discussing whether transgender athletes should be allowed to compete in women's sport. But she persisted in calling for "a debate, a conversation that includes everyone and is based, not on feeling or emotion but science." LGBTQ has turned into KGB.

It is not easy to resolve this. The science is complicated. The South African athlete, Caster Semenya, who won the Womens 800 Meters in the last Olympics, has been the center of controversy for years now. The Athletic Federations are still trying work out a fair way of dealing with her. I would not bet on science solving the problem any more than it has with drugs. But she is not a "trany". Whereas the New Zealand "trany" who won a woman's weightlifting competition is.

Sports change all the time. Once upon a time, the Olympics were for amateurs only. Then the professionals got into it and the amateurs lost out. And then the druggies got involved and the honest professionals lost out. Our sporting societies are riddled with duplicity and greed – and now it has infected gender identities.

Different sports come up with different solutions. But, at this moment, it is confused and inconsistent. If women can become generals, train as marines and fight in combat zones, why not let them compete in men's sports too? Is this an issue of equality or of fairness? It seems to me there are two solutions. One is to scrap female sports altogether. Let everyone compete together and let the best man or woman win. The other is to create a different set of categories the way there are separate games – like the Paralympics for those who are physically disadvantaged. Let there be special categories for transgender as there are different age groups or weights in some of the martial arts.

Hermaphrodites get significant space in the Talmud. But not sport! We have rarely had the luxury of indulging in sport when survival has been our priority. The Greeks introduced the Olympic games and the rabbis were no admirers of Greek physical culture. The Sadducee priests were, however, and the priests brought the games to Jerusalem after Alexander the Great. Many young Jewish men endured the surgery that disguised their circumcision so that they could compete naked without feeling embarrassed by their Jewish origin – something that is apparently in vogue nowadays on the West coast. It was our values that kept us alive, not our sport. But I do like sport and I do want to see fairness rather than political correctness.

As we prepare for Purim, we face new culture wars and threats. We have tended to use humor to cope with danger. On Purim in my youth we made fun of everyone – from rabbis to politicians; from teachers to ideas. And we would get dressed up and disguised, men as women, boys as girls (and vice versa), cowboys, Indians, Arabs and belly dancers.

Nowadays this is what is called cultural expropriation – a cardinal sin in Liberal America. If I pretend to be someone else, even in jest, I can be accused of being a misogynist, a racist and colonialist. But it is OK to call Jews "Nazis". If I put on a gorilla suit, I may be accused of offending Gorillas. Even if we do it all in private, a loose photograph can condemn us forever.

Some Jews now want to claim that Purim is a negative glorification of violence. When it was, and is, no more than a celebration of survival and

freedom. Maybe the only option left for Purim is indeed to get drunk. The Megillah is a story of upside down, randomness and turning events on their heads. The whole world seems now to be celebrating Purim without realizing it.
