



## Supporting Notes: Ritual Reconstructed Films

### “Transgender Day of Remembrance”

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Professor Margaret Greenfields

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## Supporting Notes: Ritual Reconstructed Films

### “Transgender Day of Remembrance”

This documentary is the first in our sequence of LGBTQI-Jewish ‘ritual year’ films. The film consists of a series of short discussions with the two people participating in the ritual service of remembrance (Surat-Shaan Knan a trans man and community activist and Rabbi Janet Darley, a progressive Jewish Rabbi who is a member of Liberal Judaism, the community partner faith organisation which has collaborated on the Ritual Reconstructed project) and contains footage of elements of the actual ritual. The film takes place within a specifically interfaith ritual space which has been created in a London church for the purposes of this event. The film includes a pre-enactment (occurring in advance of the service which took place later that day) of the specifically Jewish elements within a unique Inter-faith Transgender Day of Remembrance. The ritual shown on film has never before taken place in an inter-faith setting and is a clear example of the blending of both age-old Jewish ritual practice and commemoration of Trans people’s history and past and present traumas.

We have commenced this series of films *not* with the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) which takes place in the Autumn/Fall<sup>1</sup> with slight variations in date each year as a result of Judaism following a lunar calendar; but with the first specifically LGBT faith-based event of the year which falls close to our New Year.

### Background

Every November 20th, transgender people and allies gather around the world to commemorate the victims of transphobic violence killed in the last year as well as to remember those who have lost their lives as a result of persecution or exclusion in earlier times.

**The Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDoR)** was founded in 1998 by Gwendolyn Ann Smith to honour the memory of Rita Hester in Allston, Massachusetts, USA. Since its inception, TDoR has slowly evolved from a web-based project into an international day of action.

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<sup>1</sup> (see further notes on the ‘Jewish Ritual Year’ on the Ritual Reconstructed website)

*“The Transgender Day of Remembrance seeks to highlight the losses we face due to anti-transgender bigotry and violence. I am no stranger to the need to fight for our rights, and the right to simply exist is first and foremost. With so many seeking to erase transgender people — sometimes in the most brutal ways possible — it is vitally important that those we lose are remembered, and that we continue to fight for justice.”* – Transgender Day of Remembrance founder Gwendolyn Ann Smith

Typically, a TDoR memorial event includes a reading of the names of those who lost their lives during the previous year, but may also include other actions, such as candlelight vigils, film screenings, or marches.

On 21 November 2014, London’s first ever interfaith TDoR service was held at the Metropolitan Community Church in Camden. Over 50 LGBTQI people of faith and allies joined the service.

The Transgender Day of Remembrance is a day of solemnity and mourning. It is also a day where we remember and honour those we have lost. Participating in this day is also a symbol of solidarity as we continue to fight for a better world.

### **What the specifically Jewish elements in TDoR as shown in this film?**

Rabbi Janet Darley and trans activist Surat-Shaan Knan were invited to facilitate a Jewish ceremony as part of London’s first ever interfaith TDoR, using traditional as well as contemporary Jewish prayers and rituals to enable spiritual reflection which was meaningful and familiar to Jewish participants.

Within the ritual, there is an emphasis on ‘remembrance’ and ‘memorialisation of those who are dead’; as well as the commitment to social justice and seeking to create a better world through a duty to engage with ‘*Tikkun Olam*’ (“repair of the world”); elements which are all core to Jewish theology and liturgy.

The TDoR service includes physically enacted ritual elements which reflect too, themes which are embedded within the most profoundly

spiritual period of the Jewish year known as the High Holy Days (*Rosh Hashanah*; the intervening 'Days of Awe' and *Yom Kippur*).

For example: lighting the Yartzheit candle (memorial candle lit on the anniversary of someone's death and at Yom Kippur as well as on specific dates during the three 'pilgrimage' festivals of Sukkot; Pesach and Shavuot. Yartzheit candles are lit to memorialise our dead, both personal and individual loss, and more widely, those who died as a result of persecutions such as occurred during the Holocaust. In addition the TDoR ritual can be seen to bear close resemblance to the telling of the *Martyrology* within the *Yizkor* (memorial) service which takes place on *Yom Kippur* and which also includes prayers for those who have died as a result of externally inflicted violence or suicide resulting from persecution.

Rabbi Janet Darley explains: 'The first reading, "Twilight People," connects thematically to *Ma'ariv Aravim* (Shabbat Evening Service) and is followed by candle-lighting. The second reading is a prayer for Trans Day of Remembrance; it explicitly references the *Kaddish* (Mourner's Prayer). The third reading connects with themes raised in the *Amidah* (central prayer of the Jewish liturgy) and ends with a blessing/prayer of hope.'

Surat-Shaan Knan comments: '*All Jews should observe Transgender Day of Remembrance, because we all have lived in fear of being seen as 'the other'. We all remember that humanity failed to stand up to oppression, resulting in over 6 million Jews being murdered – and countless more – for being "other" [than an externally imposed model of 'normality']*.

## **Surat Shaan Knan and Margaret Greenfields**