

Chair Eklund, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Minority Member Thomas, and the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

My name is Rabbi Sharon Mars and I am submitting this testimony in support of Senate Bill 11, the Ohio Fairness Act.

As the rabbi at Temple Israel of Columbus, I am privileged to serve a diverse community and help others live out the Jewish values of welcoming the stranger and treating everyone as having been created in the image of God.

These two essential tenets form the foundation of our religious tradition and serve as a recipe for us to bring godliness into the world. For when we remember how we ourselves were once strangers - that is, when we recall any time we felt our "otherness" or differences, which is part and parcel of the human experience - we tap into our compassion and make ourselves available to experience the divine right here on earth.

Right now in our beloved state, I fear that we are quickly losing sight of what makes us so blessedly divine as human beings:

To love others as we love ourselves.

We are being blinded by our fatal flaw of judging others, using discriminatory standards the likes of which we would not want to have imposed upon ourselves or our children or grandchildren.

Rather than allowing the Judge of Judges, the Holy One God, to do so, rather than giving our fellow brothers and sisters the benefit of the doubt to determine who they are, who they know themselves to truly be inside, we are taking it upon ourselves to not only judge others unfairly but to penalize them for being who God made them to be in the first place.

Right now, most Ohioans and Ohio businesses support protections against discrimination for LGBTQ citizens. And nearly three quarters of Ohioans favor employment and housing laws that make it illegal to discriminate based on sexual orientation or gender identity. And yet here we are, deciding in this Statehouse another person's God-given truth.

We must not allow ourselves to degrade our position as beings who are called "little less than angels." Let us rather use our incredible power as God's partners to empower people to be who they are and to feel safe, secure, and dignified in their jobs, in their housing, in their hospital rooms regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Who are we to decide who another person is?

Who am I to tell you who you are, how to experience your own body, what you believe to be the truth?

We each have a hidden scroll inside of us, one which is written by the divine hand of God, and which is ultimately judged to be holy, based on how we live our lives as caring parents, dutiful daughters and sons, hard-working folks, faithful servants, and responsible citizens.

But I am here to testify here today to say that when at the end of the day each of us will come before the Judge of Truth and testify to our Creator what we understood to have been someone else's truth, we had better be ready to face the truth of our own judgment by God.

We had better be ready to say that we judged others precisely how we ourselves wanted to be judged.

We had better be ready to say that we understood and protected the stranger, that we regarded every living human soul as a divinely crafted creation carrying upon him or her the sacred imprint of God.

I therefore strongly and respectfully urge the committee members to pass SB11, the Ohio Fairness Act.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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