

NOW & THEN Transcript: Part 1

Surat:

Hello, welcome, my name is Surat Rathgeber Knan and I am the founder of the pioneering oral history project Rainbow Jews, celebrating LGBT Jewish heritage in the UK.

What you are about to see are two discussions of members of the LGBT Jewish community. We are going to be talking about their experiences in Britain being LGBT and Jewish. The group with me now, let's call them pioneers, have been active in the community for many years. Some of them have paved the way for the next generation who we are going to meet in the next discussion. Here with me are representatives from London and Brighton, on the left Rabbi Elli and Peter, and on the right, Peggy and Sacha. Before we start I would like to, each of you to tell us a bit about yourself. Rabbi Elli?

Elli:

Hello I am Rabbi Elli Sarah Tikvah. I am the Rabbi at Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue, where I have been for 13 years. I was ordained 24 years ago and I've got a lovely wife/partner whom I married in 2006 called Jess.

Surat:

Peter, what about you?

Peter:

Well, I live in Brighton and I am a member of the synagogue where Elli is Rabbi and I am also chair of the synagogue and I work in recruitment and that's pretty much it for my introduction.

Surat:

Thank you. Peggy?

Peggy:

I am Peggy Sherwood, I am president of the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group JGLG, I was a children's nurse. I am now retired happily from the NHS, and I am a member also of the Brighton and Hove Progressive synagogue.

Surat:

Sacha?

Sacha:

I'm Sacha and I live in Camden Town. I'm a member of JGLG, I'm retired and enjoying my life.

Surat:

JGLG being the Jewish Gay and Lesbian group. Yeah, um Elli, Rabbi Elli, what is your involvement, current involvement, in the Jewish and or LGBT community?

Elli:

Well I suppose it's difficult to talk about my current involvement I feel like I'm involved all the time and have been continuously through my contacts with other LGBT Jews that goes to back to, principally, the Jewish Lesbian and Gay group - but before that to the lesbian community, Jewish lesbians, back to the beginning of the 1980s. And I suppose I see myself all the time as a Jewish lesbian whose ageing in a wider community and trying to making it more inclusive for LGBT people and that's in a sense what my Rabbinate has been about.

Surat:

Peter?

Peter:

Well, I don't know, my involvement with the LGBT community is fairly limited. I used to be a member of JGLG, but it is a London based group and I live in Brighton which has meant that, I found it awkward to participate in lots of its events. So, my involvement is mostly through the things that we do with the synagogue in Brighton.

Surat:

Ok. Thank you. Peggy?

Peggy:

Well, I guess JGLG is my main involvement with the Jewish LGBT community. As I said before I run it, I am the president of it, and, it primarily is a social but it also has a monthly *Chavurah* and, it is an opportunity to go to a synagogue service that is exclusively LGBT, which is great actually.

Surat:

So what does a *Chavurah* entail?

Peggy:

Ahh, a *Chavurah*, I think the true meaning is meeting a friend, something

like that, Elli? And so it's a service, a service which is led by an out lesbian or gay Rabbi. And then afterwards, as all Jews do, we like to eat, so it's a supper where everybody brings something to eat and share and it's a social gathering. So, it has a religious component but it has equally a social component as well.

Surat:

Thank you. Sacha, what about you?

Sacha:

Well as a non-religious person. My involvement with, I feel very Jewish but, I don't belong to a synagogue. My involvement with the Jewish life is mostly, probably, through the Jewish gay group, and also through my, my Jewish friends, many Jewish friends. But, on the gay side, I belong to the London gay men's chorus and that takes up a lot of my time, putting on shows and doing, in the background, political work.

Surat:

Alright, thank you. So going, a little bit back in your lives, let's talk about your background, starting maybe from upbringing or any significant experiences in your, in your early lives that you find important for your way, paving your way, as your LGBT Jewish identity. Elli.

Elli:

Well I suppose I started off by being a little boy. Growing up in a binary world, I was born in 1955; I gave myself a male identity. I called myself, John, I called my little sister Jimmy, she's younger than me. Um, and actually, that was very tolerated I mean as a binary divide I did tolerate girls being tomboys really. But the big shock was becoming a woman and I tried that for a while in terms of heterosexuality and having boyfriends and I gave up on my 14th birthday, because I couldn't bare the way I got treated and became a 'swat', you know, became very studious, that was the best way of dealing with it. But, I didn't get very far I mean I tried a couple of boys and I sort of escaped by marrying somebody via my family. When I was nineteen, I just thought that was the way to escape all the pressure. He was lovely, he was like a brother actually and as soon as I did, having grown my hair a bit during my teens, I cut my hair and started wearing his jackets; we went to gay plays. And it was fine, except the reality was that I was a lesbian and I needed to do something about that. So that was the beginning of it and I discovered the women's liberation movement and radical feminism and became a lesbian separatist.

Surat:

Which year did that start?

Elli:

Um, 1978. Yeah that's when I came out and I left my husband and, and became part of a much bigger, a movement which was really important at that time. Particularly women's liberation movement there were lots of things going on in that and women coming together, lesbians in particular gathering, but then discover it was all sort of WASP - white angle Saxon protestant - and there wasn't much space for anybody who had other allegiances and that's when we had the first Jewish feminist conference in January '81. And then first Jewish lesbian conference in '83.

Surat:

Was that in London?

Elli:

That was in London, both of them were in London. Yeah, yeah.

Surat:

Ok. Peter, what about you?

Peter:

Well I, I came out, um, in the early 90s, somewhere around '92/'93 following, a divorce from my ex wife. And so, my gay life started relatively late. I was about thirty-three when I began to live a gay lifestyle. I sort of pursued a conventional heterosexual lifestyle because growing up as I did in the sixties and seventies I didn't think that one could live an acceptable life as a gay person. It was sort of very much portrayed in the media being as a degenerate kind of existence and not something you could have a viable career and be a part of a family and religious group, being Jewish etc.

Surat:

How was your coming out experience for you?

Peter:

Well because, yeah, it's hard to explain because I don't think I had a particular moment where I came out. It was sort of a process having become divorced and having made gay friends living in Brighton which has a very good gay population. So it was sort of a gradual process so it wasn't really like I suddenly turned my life on its head. I think the last bastion of coming out for me was with regards to my work and religion.

9:16

Surat:

The synagogue, Brighton & Hove synagogue.

Peter:

Yes, yeah.

Surat:

OK. Alright. Thank you. Peggy over here.

Peggy:

Well I guess that I was actually a lesbian. I knew from when I was I guess in my teens, but I never unfortunately did anything about it and I had my first sexual experience with a woman when I was I think about 35. You know, again like so many others I think I just couldn't believe that there were other Jewish lesbians. And actually I had no involvement, I didn't marry the two parts of my life; I didn't marry the Jewish bit and I didn't marry the lesbian bit, really until, I suppose, it was mid 1990s when I met Elli, at a service I'd seen an advert in a magazine that used to exist called 'New Moon'. It was kind of like a Jewish 'Time Out' and there was an advert in there for a Jewish lesbians synagogue service, Shabbat morning service, and I went along and I'd heard about this lesbian Rabbi, Elli Sarah, and I went and I met her and she put me in touch with the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group. And, I was, 'you know I don't know, you know, I might meet somebody I know there or...' and she sort of said 'well you know if you meet someone you know they're there for the same reason as you', which of course made perfect sense. I did go along and I was the only woman there, and just over the years, more and more women have joined and, I actually then began to get heavily involved in the group and I met my partner there nearly thirteen years ago. We've had our civil partnership and Elli did our covenant of love, six years ago, so I've managed to marry up, never thought I would, two parts of my life which are so important to me being a lesbian but equally being Jewish and it's like coming home and it's probably the best decision in my life that I ever made actually.

Surat:

That's beautiful. What is 'Covenant of Love'?

11:55

Peggy:

Well, you know in this country now, gay marriage is on it's way, but six years ago of course it wasn't and we had civil partnerships. So, my partner, Alison, and I had our civil partnership on the Thursday and then on the Sunday we had, I guess, it was a traditional Jewish wedding.

Elli:

We did a *Chuppah*, and everything?

Peggy:

Yeah we did a *Chuppah*, and Elli took the service and actually Rabbi Mark Solomon also took part and sang very beautifully. And it was a big Jewish wedding actually, a big Jewish wedding, and I never ever in my life thought I'd stand under a *Chuppah* with another Jewish woman...

Surat:

Which is?

Peggy:

Oh a *Chuppah* is, um it's, well in our case it was a, it was a *Tallit*, which is the prayer shawl that people wear in synagogue, tied on to four poles because it was like a mobile *Chuppah* and it was in Pinewood Studios actually, so it wasn't in a synagogue; it wasn't a built *chuppah*..

13:01

Elli:

It's very traditional to have a portable canopy.

Peggy:

Yes it's a canopy, thank you, Elli. So, we stood under the *Chuppah*, which is a traditional thing you stand under when you get married and broke the glass, we both broke a glass. Traditionally in a heterosexual marriage, it's the man that breaks the glass, but we broke a glass and yeah, it was lovely.

13:24

Surat:

Wonderful, wonderful. Thank you for sharing that.

Peggy:

Something that I never dreamt I'd do, but I did. And we will get married as well...

Peter:

I want to, too.

Peggy:

...When the equal marriage comes about

Surat:

Mazel tov!

Peggy:

Thank you.

Surat:

Sacha? Now to you, your personal history.

13:42

Sacha:

Well I started life in Paris, just before the war and I am a Holocaust survivor, as much as both my parents went to Auschwitz, I was hidden in the French countryside and, I was therefore able to survive together with my brother...

Surat:

How old were you as a survivor?

Sacha:

How old was I at what point?

Surat:

When you were hidden?

Sacha:

Well, when I was hidden, I suppose, I must have been about five, and then went to a number of orphanages after the war. And eventually my brother found some family we had in the UK and, well to cut a long story short, I got adopted by a family here. I was twelve and I started being a child again. My brother stayed in France because he's five years older, to which he was well on his way with his studies, and didn't want to start afresh in UK. So, we've lived across the Channel for the rest of our lives. I mean, from the point of view of being gay, I suppose I knew I was, I, I realized I was gay when I was a teenager but couldn't really formulate it and it never seemed a possibility that I could lead any kind of a gay life. I got married, I've got two lovely children and now grandchildren, and I was nearly fifty when I actually properly came out as a gay man and had my first gay sex, really, just much later than most people. But I haven't looked back since and to my great surprise I thought by the time I'm seventy, you know, life would be so on the wane for me, but I am having the most wonderful time and probably having more sex now than I ever was before, which is fantastic.

Surat:

Certainly is. So harking back deeper into this issue of being LGBT and Jewish, how far have both of these identities influenced your life and in what way? Elli? What does it mean for you being Jewish and LGBT?

16:40

Elli:

I think the starting point was I just wanted to be the person who I was and I took my Jewishness for granted because we weren't synagogue going Jews, but we did Friday nights, my mum sang Hebrew and Yiddish songs and that was very much apart of me but the thing I was really committed to was kind of radical politics because somehow knowing that I was different, but I didn't know how to describe that difference. I identified with any person that was other indifferent and persecuted. I was particularly sort of supportive as a very young teenager of the black power movement in America and anti-Apartheid and anything that was about other people being opposed was somehow sort of the way I described what it was because I couldn't come out to my family, it didn't seem, I didn't know what it meant really to be who I was being different as a teenager having to had to leave the boy behind that I sort of identified with. As things developed and I discovered the women's liberation movement, it actually came through in realizing that with my sisters....actually there was a part of me that wasn't there, that wasn't acknowledged. Or people saying 'you talk too much' or sort of little things about being Jewish, or 'why do you have to be so intellectual?'...you know, and they weren't saying 'don't be Jewish' but they were saying something about me being Jewish. And then there was actually a big event and it was the Israeli invasions of Lebanon and this unleashed a huge kind of reaction in left press but also in feminist press and there were two journals 'Spare Rib' and 'Outright' which is black women's newspaper and they all jumped on the anti-Zionist bandwagon and, you know, I was also critical of Israeli policy but it's not the same as suddenly turning it into something where Jews somehow had to explain themselves. And this is what began to happen and I already joined, got involved because we had the first Jewish feminist conference as Jewish women fighting one another and feeling that feminism wasn't really expressing all of who we were and allowing to be ourselves, and then through that met other Jewish lesbians and formed a Jewish lesbian group. And as a Jewish lesbian group we actually tackled 'Spare Rib' and 'Outright', you know, directly, you know, the things like 'Begin is Hitler', the prime minister of Israel at the time and, and you know you couldn't say you were Jewish without having to defend, you know, Israel and its stuff that's going on today. But what it did was it made me feel, you know, experiencing all this hostility but actually what does it mean for me to be a Jew. I left *Cheder* after my brother's bar mitzvah, I was eight and a half years old at the time, so I felt Jewish but what did I know about being Jewish really. So I decided I needed to explore that more and when I left my husband. I actually went to Israel on a *Kibbutz* 'cos I was in love with a woman that was on that Kibbutz, and that didn't work out but I had this experience of Israel and when I returned in '83, which is just a year after the invasion of Lebanon, and I thought

'maybe I should be in Israel, maybe that's the place to be Jewish', and then realised it's going to be pretty tricky as a lesbian and really I can't speak the language. So I came back and just as luck would have it, I saw an advert, I saw an article in the Jewish Chronicle that I never used to buy, but my aunt and uncle had it and it said that there was a program at a college that you could explore being Jewish. So I started doing that and it took me on a journey to the rabbinate. But that's the way I decided to put those two things together and want to include myself, for me being Jewish and being a lesbian, I cannot separate those and that has been a huge struggle because actually a many of people do not accept that twenty five years ago, thirty years ago when I started. So it's been quite a journey.

Surat:

It's actually quite interesting you said that about going to Israel and then going back to Britain. Does anyone have a similar experience about being LGBT Jewish in Britain? Does that mean anything to you? The freedom you've got here or the lifestyle or is it easy to live as an LGBT Jew in this country?

20:45

Peggy:

I think it's getting easier

Peter:

I think it is.

Peggy:

It's definitely getting easier because twenty years ago you couldn't belong to a synagogue, I don't think, I might be wrong but I don't think you could belong, but you wouldn't be...

Peter:

Out.

Peggy:

...You wouldn't be out probably.

Elli:

It's slightly longer than twenty; it would be twenty five years

Peggy:

Well alright. Yeah probably.

Peter:

Well I didn't feel up to until about five years ago that - when I learned about Rabbi Elli and our synagogue in Brighton - I could go to a synagogue and be gay. I could go to a synagogue and be Jewish, which I did, but I didn't feel there was room to be openly gay within a synagogue so I kept them very separate 'cos I didn't want being gay to pollute my relationship with being Jewish and having a negative effect on it.

Surat:

Does that resonate somehow with your experience here in Britain as an LGBT Jew?

Sacha:

Well as I said before not being religious or not going to synagogue, my Jewishness - I certainly feel Jewish and I've got a lot of Jewish friends, but I don't have the same conflict because, you know, religious services just don't mean anything for me.

Surat:

You two talked about female perspective as such....Do you think there is a difference if you're looking into LGBT Jewish lives? And we're saying that LGBT stands for Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender and also queer and questioning people. Is that a different experience do you feel as a Jewish woman?

22:50

Elli:

I think first of all you've got the actual *Torah* making specific, you know, one man should not lie with another man as with a woman it's an abomination in Leviticus Chapter 18, so you've got a direct anti sort of expression of any male sexuality of two men together, which we don't have. On the other hand, lesbians are invisible so it is a different experience.

Peter:

Well, in traditional Judaism women are sort of invisible.

Elli:

Women are invisible. Absolutely. Yeah, so that is a difference.

Surat:

Peggy?

Peggy:

Yeah, you know, certainly nowadays my partner and I, we belong to a synagogue down in Brighton, but we actually live in London and I would say I think we could be welcomed in any, as a lesbian couple, we can probably be welcomed in any liberal reformed synagogue, not so the orthodox, but certainly in liberal.

23:52

Elli:

But that's now, I mean, a lot of hard work has been done to achieve that.

Peggy:

Absolutely!

Elli:

And when I started that was not the case and we were put on, both myself and Sheila Shulman who became a Rabbi, we were both put on five year probation through Leo Baeck College, and then subsequently she started a congregation. I went to a mainstream one where I had all sorts of struggles and then within the Reform movement initially, I had to leave a post in the former movement because they weren't ready to be inclusive. So it's been a long struggle. The Liberal movement did take it out, it was the first one to take it out, but I think what we are seeing today is that there has been a lot of change, so that in the last twenty five years and then sped up really from 2000 in the last thirteen years, so in half that period and when Liberal Judaism established a working party that I served on for looking at same sex 'commitment ceremonies' as it was called. We are now at a point where two years ago there was a conference for Liberal Judaism where we prepared to say we support same-sex marriage. Now that's something I wanted years ago, I started talking about it in the mid -90s, but we're now at that point that it is happening and now the Reform in the last couple of years is also supportive, so you're absolutely right, you can but a lot of people don't know that you can, you know that, but there are a lot of people out there that don't know that there are synagogues that will welcome them.

Surat:

Peter?

Peter:

Yeah I very much agree, as Elli, as Rabbi Elli, has described how this has developed over the last twenty five years and in the last thirteen years it's been sped up. Well you would know that if you are affiliated with a synagogue, but if you are Jewish, as Sacha has explained, as many Jews are cultural Jews who have a complete Jewish identity as most Jews do, but don't go to a synagogue then I think your perception is that you wouldn't be

welcomed in a synagogue as a gay person, because you haven't had contact with a synagogue that does condone it and does support it. So, I've only been affiliated with the synagogue for five years, because up until that point that I didn't know that there was a synagogue that it was ok to be gay and Jewish. Once I found out, I was very keen to becoming involved, because one didn't compromise the other and I could be who I am and as you say experience being both.

Surat:

What about Sacha and anything you can think of, inclusion in synagogues? What's your experience?

Sacha:

Well, as I've said before I don't have a great experience of synagogues, because I don't go, but I think it's quite remarkable the speed at which changes have happened and long may it continue. I think we're almost at a point where we're certainly legally straight or gay, now we've got to persuade people to go along with that. The shame is that some countries don't have the same liberal attitudes as we have - and in Russia for example they're going back the other way and are persecuting gays much more than they used to. And in Cameroon I saw recently, similarly.

27:42

Elli:

But that's why we need more campaigning, I mean one of the frustrations for an old activist like me is that we've got very complacent, you know when we were going on marches in the late 70s and 80s, we knew that we had something to fight for, we were fighting against Clause 28, which was very discriminatory against lesbian gay people, you know there was something we had to do. So now we're in a position where actually were enjoying so much more inclusion and equality, we really need to be doing something on behalf of our LGBT brothers and sisters across the globe and when we recently had the gay pride march in Brighton and I thought where do I want to march. I felt very uncomfortable because it was just, it was just a party and then I saw a group with Peter Tatchell, who were, who were from Africa, Cameroon, various African countries and Algeria. I wanted to march there.

Surat:

What do you think needs to be done, if you are looking into the future like one sort of final vision? What do we need to work on here in Britain for LGBT Jewish community or where do we go?

Peter:

Hmm that's a tough question.

Peggy:

Yes it is a tough question. I would like to see us welcome by the Orthodox community, but sadly I don't think that's going to happen.

Elli:

Never say never. They've already moved quite a lot. You know, everywhere there is development. There are women being ordained as Orthodox rabbis, they just haven't got pulpits, both in Israel and America. So that will happen. I do actually think that our inclusion needs to be greater than it is. I think trans issues are really important and I am finding it really liberating that's now being discussed more, that I can see myself more as sort of gender-variant in a way that I couldn't; that language wasn't there before and I think that's something we have a challenge within our own Jewish LGBT community to really say that we are not just lesbian or gay, you know the Jewish Lesbian and Gay group, we really do acknowledge and include properly, bisexual and transgender people, however people are describing themselves as trans. And I think that's our own challenge actually, to be as inclusive as we want the wider society to be.

Surat:

And of course we are all going to be embracing Jewish gay marriages very soon.

Peter:

Absolutely.

Surat:

Peggy?

Peggy:

Absolutely, no question.

Elli:

We are definitely going to be doing ours again.

Surat:

OK so we are going to have some marriages coming up soon. Wonderful and let's remember that each and every one of you are contributing to LGBT Jewish history in the UK.