

Who are the Gay Rabbis?

Lionel Blue, born 6 February 1930, was the first British rabbi publicly to declare his homosexuality. He remembers how he decided to do so:

“ There was a complete change... What had started in 1950 was now coming out in England. And the newspaper was on my trail, and somebody told me this was happening, they were going to get me, so I thought the first thing to do was get my story in first. So I made a disclosure of it to a big newspaper in Britain, and I argued my case – why I was what I was and why I did what I did. ”

Born in the East End of London, Lionel had grown up without any notion that same sex love was possible for him as a Jew.



Rabbi Lionel Blue (Portrait by Gary Italiaander, www.italiaander.co.uk).

Rabbi Lionel Blue is famous for his wisdom and warmth, and he has inspired many of Britain's LGBT Jews. Among them was Mark Solomon, who, with Lionel's help, began coming to terms with his identity:

“ I had been working towards being an Orthodox rabbi, and this [my homosexuality] was not going to fit in with that at all. There were very few people I could talk to about it, but when I contacted Rabbi Lionel Blue, he began helping me to put my life back together. I felt he was someone that I could really talk to, who... knew the Jewish side and the gay side. ”

In 1992, Rabbi Mark Solomon made a public statement about his sexual orientation and subsequently left the United Synagogue to become a progressive rabbi:

“ It was still kind of news-worthy back in those days, I was certainly the first Orthodox rabbi who came out in this country, and Lionel Blue was the only other gay rabbi. ”

Views on homosexuality have changed since the two rabbis came out, as Lionel Blue says in his Rainbow Jews interview in 2013:

“ There have been two revolutions in life in the 20th century. One has been the change of women's status. And the other one is the emancipation of the sexual minorities; both of them have changed the dialogue very much indeed. I don't think people today mind if the rabbi is gay, lesbian or what, provided that the person is kind, decent and learned. What else do I think? LGBT people can give the Jewish world humour, which it needs very badly. ”

*A Yiddish is an expression for a gay person, often derogative.

When Elli met Sheila

Sheila Shulman and Elizabeth "Elli" Tikvah Sarah started to train at Leo Baeck College, East Finchley, in 1984. They were the first openly lesbian rabbinical students. After being ordained in 1989, Sheila went on to found the first lesbian-feminist congregation in the UK, Beit Klal Yisrael (BKY).

Sheila elaborates on BKY's history and ethos:

“As it happened, the founding group was [made up of] seven women; I had in mind a community that is predominantly gay and lesbian. It was carefully diverse: if straight people were joining it would have to be on the assumption that they understood that if we were marginalised they were also marginalised - they were allies.”

Elli met Sheila in 1982 at a Jewish lesbian Group. She described her experience as "powerful".

“We were putting together what it meant for us to be a lesbian, to be a Jew. We could see strong similarities, because in both cases people would not necessarily know [that] we were - [lesbian and Jewish] - [we had] minority marginal identities.”

Elli realised how powerful her Jewish identity was. In 1983, she decided to become a rabbi "to solve her existential dilemma":

“My rabbinate is dedicated to inclusion in every respect. I have been doing all I can to enable and facilitate other people - Jewish LGBT people and anybody who doesn't feel mainstream - who feel on the margins and excluded.”

Why this community will be different . . .

Lindsay Schumann
Over 150 people turned up for the launch of a new alternative Jewish congregation in London on Sunday night. Beit Klal Yisrael (the House and Land) will hold its first service later this month, and will be based in Haringey Hill Close. It is the brainchild of Brooklynshe Rabbis Sheila Shulman, who was ordained last year.

Rabbi Shulman, 51, who has lived in Britain for 20 years, believes there are many unaffiliated Jews who cannot find a home in existing communities. She herself was surprised and encouraged by Sunday night's attendance - nearly 200, 45 year olds - at the Swiss Cottage Community Centre in North-West London, for the launch of the new congregation, which is not yet affiliated to the Reform movement. Beit Klal Yisrael will also be known as the North Kensington Reform Synagogue. Following a stirring speech by Rabbi Shulman - which received enthusiastic applause, prospective members danced to a women's klezmer band.

A manifestation of the movement's aims banded out at the launch event was a "particular welcome" to: "Jewish women and men who may not think of themselves as formally religious..."; "Lesbian, Jews, and gay Jews..."; "Jews who are, for one reason or another, on their own..."; "The challenge to join the rabbinate was part of a gradual process. For many years she was a secondary school teacher, and a book publisher and editor in a small company.

"I had undergone a major surgery," she said, "and was in my late 40s, and, I guess, I was having a rethink about my life." She started to read more about Judaism and slowly became more involved in Jewish life.

After taking several courses at the Reform and Liberal movements' Leo Baeck College, in Finchley, while recuperating from hip operation, she eventually decided to become a rabbi.

Rabbi Shulman wants to attract Jewish people to Beit Klal Yisrael who may have never been part of a congregation before. "We are appealing to people who feel strongly Jewish," she says, "but who may be uncertain how to express it, and are not sure whether they want to be part of one themselves or not."

She hopes the fledgling community will be small and welcoming. Sunday services will be held regularly. "The congregation will attract single people, gay and lesbian Jews, as well as young people with families," she said.

Rabbi Shulman also wants the community to be "non-agonously experimental." She said: "For example, we would like to mark the times of transition in women's lives with appropriate prayers and blessings."

She added she was delighted by the response which, she said, "was a real surprise."

The Swiss Cottage Community Centre was packed with a diverse range of people. Sounds of klezmer music were coming from the main hall. Inside, a young man, holding a small child in each arm, swayed to the music.

A woman, her child in a papoose, joined a large circle of people who were dancing. Other people stood by, chatting, or looking into sandwiches, breads and cake. The emphasis was clearly on enjoyment and participation.

Glassy move
Simon Beecher
The senior Orthodox head Yaskov Clerk Primary School is set to expand when it moves from Colders Green to its new site. Last year we had to refuse to take in 10 girls. A campaign has been launched to raise funds for what Mr Gilbert says "is the largest capital project in Jewish education this area has seen."

Rabbi Sheila Shulman, as her ordination last year

Rabbi Sheila Shulman was overjoyed about the success of BKY's launch event and inspired to create an inclusive and diverse community. Jewish Chronicle, 4 June 1990.



Rabbi Sheila Shulman. Photograph credit: Peter Daniels.



Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah. Copyright Matthew Andrews, 2011.

Two women ordained

Jewish Chronicle Reporter
Five Leo Baeck College graduates - two of them women - were ordained as rabbis for the Progressive movement on Sunday at a ceremony held at the West London Reform Synagogue.

The women were Ms Sheila Shulman, who was educated in New York and has been a student rabbi at Reform communities in Harlow and Buckhurst Hill, in Essex, and in Cambridge; and Ms Elizabeth Sarah, a sociologist, educational researcher and writer, who is to be full-time rabbi at Buckhurst Hill from September.

Also ordained were Mr Francis Berry, a zoologist and former teacher, who has worked at the Harlow and Cardiff Reform congregations; Mr David Hukilam, a scientist, who has worked for the Ministry of Defence and has been a student rabbi at Barkingside and Glasgow; and Mr Danny Rich, an historian, who was chairman of the Manchester University students' union and has worked with the Hull, South Hertfordshire, Leicester and Kingston communities. He is now full-time minister at the Kingston Liberal Synagogue.

Rabbi Sheila Shulman (left) and Rabbi Elizabeth Sarah at Sunday's ordination. Both are Leo Baeck College graduates

Breaking news: two lesbian rabbis ordained in the same year. Jewish Chronicle, 14 June 1989.