

Interview Summary for Rainbow Jews

Interviewer: Surat Knan

Interviewee: Rabbi Sheila Shulman

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Track A: 0:00:00:0 - 0:07:34:0 Childhood and Upbringing

Rabbi Sheila Shulman says that she prefers to be called Sheila rather than Rabbi Sheila. She was born in 1936 in the Bronx, her whole childhood was in Brooklyn in the United States. Her family is from the Ukraine, they came when her mother was small. Her grandfather was a carpenter, her mother and sisters worked from the age of 14 or 15. She remembers hearing about the Holocaust through newsreels, and that there were huge block parties at the end of the war. *Jews lived in three worlds; Die velt, Yener velt and Roosevelt, this world, the next world and Roosevelt.* When she heard that FDR had died, she told her grandmother, who was more distraught than over the atomic bomb dropping.

Her father died when she was 6, she spent a lot of time at her grandmother's house, which had Yiddish radio and newspapers. *Family evenings were yelling, when people got back from work they would yell.* One reason she is in England is that it is quieter. She was a lonely kid, a latchkey child, she read a lot and didn't have many friends. She was not unhappy as long as her mother let her alone.

Track A: 0:07:35:0 - 0:10:39:0 Jewish upbringing

She does not think she really had a Jewish upbringing, though her grandmother and one aunt kept kosher, her mother was not kosher and all the sisters would eat lobster at a Chinese restaurant once a week. Friday evening there were candles and a meal at her grandmother's, then yelling at home. She went to synagogue on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, she was the first grandchild, who was handed round to be admired. *The neighbourhood was Jewish and Catholic – I never met a Protestant till College.* She remembers her father bringing her a big book of Bible stories and loving it. Her family spoke Yiddish. Normally they read Forward which was social democrat, once she bought Frieheit, a Yiddish communist paper and her grandmother threw her out of the house with it.

Track A: 0:10:40:0 - 0:14:07:0 Holocaust and the birth of Israel

If I'd been 19 or 20 at the end of the war instead of 9 or 10 I would have been Israeli. She was horrified by the war, she felt she was alive by a fluke. She listened to the UN vote on the radio and was overjoyed when the State was ratified. She made aliyah in 1970 which was a big mistake, she only lasted 6 months. She liked working on lemon and orange trees on a kibbutz. It was a culture shock, no-one spoke Yiddish. She was *fleeing, not going to somewhere, out of sentimental nostalgia. I am a throughly Diaspora person.*

Track A 0:14:08:0 – 0:15:29:0 Zionism and the Diaspora

She is not a Zionist, though she recognises Israel's need to exist. She doesn't think of Jews being all over the world as exile, she thinks of it as diaspora, as a dispersion. *There is incredible cultural richness for us and we enrich any culture we've been through.* In the early 1950s, there was a guy who described himself as a "citizen of the world" and he kept being imprisoned for travelling without a passport, she identified with him.

Track A 0:15:30:0 - :17:29:0 Feeling at home at College

The closest thing Sheila had to a feeling of home was when she went to College, on the Hudson River, the counsellor at camp suggested she applied and she got a scholarship. *It was very, very beautiful geographically, they let me in to Paradise as far as I was concerned, there were books, people, poetry, everything I had imagined.* Brooklyn felt like exile to her. When she has her ashes scattered, she would like it to be on the Hudson River, but she says we can't do that. *I was the only one who cried at my graduation, I didn't want to leave.*

Track A 0:17:30:0 – 0:22:24:0 Gender and sexuality

The worst thing you could be was a lesbian, this was the last 1940s and 50s. To her, the air felt soaked in Freud, D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller. Nobody explained puberty to her, though her uncle was a doctor and had a booklet, and a girl lent her the Well of Loneliness. She was very worried that she might be a lesbian, it was a very co-ed College, she describes everyone as screwing around, her included. She would fall in love with one friend after another and used to leave roses from the rose garden outside the doors of those she liked. She played at being straight, she was married in 1959, it lasted till 1965. She was running from the meat market in New York at grad school, he was from a small town looking for sophistication. *We were completely at cross purposes. In retrospect, we worked out he was in love with his best friend, I was in love with his best friend's sister. We were both so scared, we married each other and kept house for 5 years. Then he decided he was gay and left.*

Track A 0:22:25:0 – 0:25:00:0 Judaism and coming out

She did not come out till 1972. The delay was not to do with being Jewish or her family, *it was to do with the whole socialization – Freud and Lawrence. After the war women went back into their homes, there was the New Look, it was the worst time in the world to be a woman.* From age 16 it was the same as any immigrant family, always asking "when are you going to get married?" *I found an interesting bunch at university, intellectually very free, screwing around, but half our head was like a Jane Austen novel, the important thing was to find a husband.* She remembers it as bizarre, she doesn't know how one side of their heads talked to the other side.

Track A 0:25:01:0 – 0:29:32:0 Coming out and feminism

Coming out was tied up for Sheila with becoming a feminist. Her first relationship was with a student of hers, around 1968-70. She was 22, Sheila was 32. She was terrified, closeted, felt she was dying morally, being clandestine and wrecking their lives. She didn't notice the whole campus was coming out and there were consciousness-raising groups everywhere. She kept being told to read about feminism but she thought it bourgeois nonsense, she reckons she was probably a sort of Maoist at this time. *Eventually I read Sisterhood is Powerful, there's a section on "Know your enemy" – five pages of deeply misogynistic quotes from every writer I had ever loved. I had never noticed.* Sheila became a radical lesbian feminist very quickly. In 1972 there was a conference in Acton with 2000 women and she joined a writers' group. It became clear she was becoming a lesbian. *A woman kissed me, right in the middle of Oxford Street. That was unbelievable, I wanted to yell. It was definitive, you are now OUT, it was the closest to joy I've ever come. We are still friends. I was a very slow learner, I usually am, I deny, then read, then eventually experience catches up.*

Track A 0:29:33:0 – 0:33:51:0 Moving to the United Kingdom and Israel

After her marriage broke up, Sheila was a grad student and in therapy with a Viennese guy who said "you don't want to be paying me, you want to get out". Her dissertation was on Virginia Woolf, she knew her tutor knew Leonard Woolf and she got a letter of introduction. She came to the UK for a year. *I didn't stop to think that every shred of Virginia Woolf's papers were in New York in the library.* It was 1968 and she was distracted from her dissertation and liked it here very much. During that year she had a letter from a small liberal arts, girls' progressive College, inviting her to teach for a year. She was honoured because it was a prestigious place. At the end of her study year, she went back and taught at Sarah Lawrence for 2 years. By this time she was entangled with a young woman who was within a semester of graduating. She was not rehired and thought she had better make her break for her sake. She went on aliyah and lasted 6 months, till the woman graduated. Then she met her in London and stayed ever since, except for 1976 when she went back to California, which was a big mistake and she came running back to London.

Track A 0:33:52:0 – 0:35:32:0 Friendship lost

She still has paintings on her wall by her first love, but they lost track of each other. They stayed in touch, were friendly for a while, then she moved to Portugal. *I got newsy letters, then there was no return address. My friend would ask a lot of questions, but there was no way to reply. I used to get a letter on my birthday, then my friend wrote that she was moving back to the USA, after that, nothing.* She tried to track her through a friend on Facebook, but she doesn't seem to be there.

Track A 0:35:33:0 – 0:39:16:0 Jewish lesbians

A bunch of people got together in 1974 to start a Jewish lesbian feminist group, it was organised through the Women's Liberation Newsletter, which was still done with stencils in Earlham Street. *We met a couple of times but there was a furious backlash from non-Jewish partners of women in the group and other English women. There was anti-semitism in the Women's Liberation Movement.* Some women wanted the Goddess and Wicca, others were more politically engaged, so there was a split. She engaged again at a Jewish women's conference in 1980, it was in a very cold Church hall near Kings Cross, there was a blizzard. *There were mothers and daughters there, feminists and non-feminists. I was in a group with Elli Sarah, we talked and read.*

Then there was Sabra and Shatilla; Spare Rib had a anti-Zionist anti-semitic article. *We wanted the right of reply, but Spare Rib would only allow that if we said we were non-Zionists.* Sheila had enough of that with McCarthyism in the States. It went on and on, it ended in a boycott of Spare Rib for a couple of years. It took a lot of the group's energy.

Track A 0:39:17:0 – 0:44:35:0 Judaism and becoming a Rabbi

I started thinking about Judaism as opposed to being Jewish, I realised I knew zip about it. She started reading, from 1980 on she was exploring. Eventually it got her to Leo Baeck College. *That being a Rabbi should have come out of this particular past still blows my mind.* She read a book by a Reform Rabbi and went to see him. *I hadn't talked to a man in 10 years, never mind a Rabbi. He put Jonathan Magonet and Lionel Blue in touch with me. Jonathan invited me for dinner, he was Principal of the College, we talked.* She was on sick leave, he suggested she took some courses, philosophy and other things. Pretty soon Jonathan and Lionel and another Rabbi, Albert Friedlander suggested she do the Rabbinic course. *I told them they were out of their minds. Every time I went to a service it was like going to Mars. I was a radical lesbian feminist and knew nothing about the Anglo-Jewish scene. I was 48 years old and looking for work. I talked with my partner, who was a lapsed Catholic.* The College then would give a bursary if you worked for the Movement for 5 years. Sheila thought *someone's offering to pay me to study and I'm loving what I'm discovering.*

When I do go to services there's not much I choke on, I can say most of it, sort-of. There are more worlds out there. It will be real work, I can discover. Would it be possible to be all of who I am, lesbian, feminist, Jew, maybe, who knows? She did the application, saying she was a lesbian and a feminist and thought she would go on till she hit a brick wall. She reckons she has been that far, but not quite. I didn't believe I would be ordained, even when I was standing there. I didn't know Elli Sarah had signed up as well, I got there for the admission interviews and nearly plotzed. I thought they would take one lesbian but not two, they'll take her, she's younger than me, they'll get 20 years more work out of her. They ended up taking both of us, on probation for five years. There were many steep learning curves at once, I really knew zip.

Track A 0:44:36:0 – 0:46:30:0 Being a lesbian at Rabbinical College

Sheila found that she and Elli made the other women students nervous; it seemed if they were out, then communities might think that they (the other women students) were lesbians too. When they went on congregational placements, there had to be delicate negotiations with the Council of the Synagogue about if it was ok? Usually it was ok. Jonathan told them to be discreet, not to talk about being a lesbian and a Rabbi in the same breath. *But that was exactly what I wanted to do, I didn't do it for 5 years. We behaved very well, exemplary, were very good students, congregationally impeccable, gave good sermons. I didn't quite hit a brick wall, but it was hard. I can only assume I wanted it very badly. In every congregation where I was more than once, like on a placement, the conversation about being a lesbian would come up. I had some decent conversations, some idiotic.*

Track A 0:46:31:0 – 0:47:29:0 Commitment ceremonies.

After she was ordained, there was the whole first commitment ceremony hoo-hah in the Rabbinic Assembly. All of us went out to talk to congregations.

Track A 0:47:30:0 – 0:48:40:0 Other organisations

Sheila joined a Women Rabbis group, and there was an interfaith Jewish, Christian and Muslim conference once a year in Germany, with Elli she started a women's conference. There was the Half-Empty Bookcase Jewish women's conference. Every time there was a chance for a seminar or paper, she did what she could and reckons Elli did too.

Track A 0:48:41:0 – 0:50:46:0 After ordination

After she was ordained, she didn't have any work, and she went to see Rabbi Lionel Blue. He said "start a congregation". She thought about it. There was a very nice colleague who had been teaching basic Judaism at Roehampton University and asked if she would like to take over his teaching, she said yes please. She had some work at Finchley Reform Synagogue, teaching proselytes – converts – and catalogued a room full of books in the library at College. For a while she had about 5 part-time jobs.

Track A 0:50:47 – end Beit Klal Yisrael

Meanwhile she was trying to start Beit Klal Yisrael. In March 1990 there was the first benefit, a big launch celebration. The first person she talked to was V, the most secular Jew she knew, also a lesbian and a feminist. She thought if she could trust her about it, it was fine. Another was a lapsed Catholic. *Talking to a friend at a party about it as a fantasy, she handed me a cheque saying "You'll need stationery. And that was like a kaleidoscope clicking, it went from being a fantasy to maybe being real. Slowly, slowly, we talked and got going.*

[Interview ends, to be continued]