

Interview Summary for Rainbow Jews

Interviewer: Surat Knan

Interviewee: Rabbi Sheila Shulman. Part 2

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This is the second interview with Rabbi Sheila Shulman, on 19 November 2013, in North Kensington, London.

Track A: 0:00:00:0 – 0:01:41:0 The name Beit Klal Yisrael

BKY stands for Beit Klal Yisrael which means the house of all Israel and we chose that because it's about as inclusive as you can get, except that the phrase Klal Yisrael had been used for quite a long time now, about 20 years, by right-wing or reactionary groups to posit a hypothetical unity of the Jewish people. So they said if you start a group for lesbians, you'll be breaking up Klal Yisrael, if you marry out you'll be breaking up Klal Yisrael, if you do anything that was not very narrow, narrowly-understood normative Judaism, they said you will destroy Klal Yisrael. So I said no, we are Klal Yisrael. So we called it Beit Klal Yisrael to make it clear it was us, not them, or us as well as them and nobody was going to be able to use that phrase as a weapon any more.

Track A: 0:01:42:0 – 0:03:45:0 Origins of Beit Klal Yisrael

I was ordained in 89, by early 1990 we were meeting and talking and thinking about it, a bunch of us. The first benefit was in March 90, it was an evening in a Swiss Cottage community centre. We sent out invitations, the list was enormous, I can't remember who. I gave a talk and there was music by Julia Bard and a friend of hers whose name I can't remember unfortunately, who called themselves the Rote Klezmerim, the Red Klezmer, music and dancing. It was an enormously diverse group, it was a party basically, we just had a speech and a party. Then very slowly we began, we found a place to hold services. Getting up to Notting Hill Gate was a convent and a study centre run by a group of nuns called Sisters of Sion, who were a very interesting group because they used to be missionaries to the Jews. After Vatican II they turned themselves inside out, as it were, and became dedicated to learning about Judaism and to working with interfaith work with Jews, so they were very friendly and open and some of them had studied at the College, so there was a room at their study centre that they let us use. If I recall correctly it may have been free, I can't remember, but certainly for not much.

Track A: 0:03:46:0 – 0:06:09:0 Beit Klal Yisrael first services

The first services were a real hoot because there was me doing services and the little group with whom I'd founded the thing, most of whom were dedicatedly secular, coming along to services and being bums on seats. So I felt like I was kind of talking to the walls for quite a while and eventually a couple of guys came, till then it was all women, a couple of gay men, and eventually people began coming to services. We had a Seder that year, I think we held it at the Quaker House in St Martin's Lane and that was very big and very successful.

Meanwhile we were a little founding group which had been doing all the work, meeting and talking and doing all the schlepping and all the planning and it was exhausting and at the same time I was teaching basic Judaism at Roehampton, I was doing some work for Finchley Reform Synagogue working with proselytes and I was also working in the library at Leo Baeck College. So there were 4 jobs at least. And it slowly took off. We spent hours, we spent meetings and meetings and meetings working out a fair and egalitarian and clear constitution. We formed ourselves as a charity but also a PLC so none of us could ever be personally liable for anything but working between the demands of the Charities Commission and the kind of egalitarianism we wanted, 2 of the people in

the founding group were solicitors at that point. So the meetings were very intense and very ... how can I put it, we considered a number of small points very, very carefully and at great length and in great detail.

Track A: 0:06:10:0 – 0:08:19:0 Beit Klal Yisrael founders

It just happened that the founding group were 7 women, some of whom, 2 of whom were not Jewish, but that was beside the point, they were partners of Jewish women. I had in mind a community that might be predominately gay and lesbian but would be open to feminists, to people on their own, to people who felt disaffected from ordinary synagogue communities, whose politics didn't fit. We very carefully articulated a list, we said everybody's welcome but then we had a list of about 7 categories, which I can no longer remember but which we articulated very carefully and can still be found on our newsletter or on our website. It was very careful to include those who identified as secular but still had questions they wanted to think about. It was about as carefully diverse within a radical consensus as we could get it. So I think we ended up being mostly, probably two-thirds gay and lesbian and one-third straight, if we were measuring that way but I'm not even sure it's like that any more. But if straight people joined us, it would have to be on the assumption that they understood that if we were marginalised, they were also marginalised. They were allies in some much more real way than is usually the case. And I think that's been true.

Track A: 0:08:20:0 – 0:09:51:0 Reactions from outside the community

I went to see Rabbi Hugo Gryn zichrono levraha, who has died since, who was then the Rabbi at West London Synagogue in Seymour Place, the big cathedral of Reform Judaism, because what I was doing was roughly on his patch and I knew that I'd been let into the College over his dead body, so to speak, but I thought I should go and see him. He was amazing, he was incredibly generous, he wrote out a big cheque. He said did we need scrolls? We could borrow scrolls from them, use their bulletin boards for announcements. He was astonishing, so that was another good thing that happened.

The reactions were generally encouraging, certainly among my colleagues they were encouraging, certainly no hassle from anywhere. There was the JGLG, the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group, but aside from that we were the only ones who explicitly welcomed gays and lesbians as far as I know, certainly the only synagogue I could have gone to, if you see what I mean. That wasn't entirely true. Obviously I officiated at other synagogues, but BKY was my home turf, as it were.

Track A: 0:09:52:0 – 0:13:04:0 Home and partner and how we met

I'd been settled into London life since 1970 and it was my home. I'd spent a year in America in 1976 and come screaming back here, that's when I knew I was settling here for good. I moved into this flat in North Kensington in 1980, it was part of a women's housing co-op, my partner and I didn't live together but we've been partners a long time, since 74 or something. She was not Jewish but she had a really finely honed sense, we used to play with the Bible together, we had a lot of fun together over it. I met my partner in 73 maybe, the Women's Liberation Workshop had lost its premises, a bunch of us were looking for new premises, I was part of something called the Premises Committee. There was a meeting at the Town Hall and Liz was part of the Premises Committee too, though I didn't know her. So there was a whole bunch of us there and we went for coffee afterwards, I can't remember exactly why, and slowly, slowly. So I met her in the course of looking for premises for the Women's Liberation Workshop which was before a whole bunch of us squatted the workshop in Earlham Street, which took ages to do, but we did it.

It was possible then if there was an unoccupied building to take it over and use it, to squat it. So

somebody, I don't know who, found this building in Earlham Street which was right near Covent Garden, which was a 4 storey office building, ancient and decrepit and so we moved in. We got the electricity going, we decorated it, we painted it and it became ours for quite a number of years and that became the Women's Liberation Workshop. Squatting was kind of semi-legal then. My partner was also involved in these activities. She didn't come along to BKY all that often but she was involved in the organisational meetings and helped with stuff a lot.

Track A: 0:13:05:0 – 0:16:49:0 Beit Klal Yisrael celebration and evolution

I remember in our seventh year at Rosh Hashana, I think it was the only time that I've ever had the nerve to do a sermon that was not afraid to be celebratory. I said OK, that this Rosh Hashana it's going to be BKY's Shabbat year and we're going to celebrate. That was very important for me. We've now been going for seven years, we could not worry for however long that was, for that celebratory moment. The congregation was growing, our festival celebrations were wonderful, the Klezmer Club band was coming to all the Simchat Torah stuff, I think a lot of people were having a good time. I was pretty happy, as close to happy as I ever get, which isn't all that. I could find the nerve to say I'm pleased and proud and happy, which is unheard of for me.

More guys came, some more straight people came, some of the lesbians began having babies, which was all very nice except that we weren't big enough to provide for them. It was kind of fun to have kids around really, but we couldn't do crèches, we didn't have Cheder, we weren't that big. So a lot of the lesbians moved up to another new community in Stoke Newington, which was a new Progressive community, but that also had quite a large gay and lesbian community. But mostly it was lesbians who had kids who moved away from BKY which was kind-of a loss for us cos it was nice having them around, but that community could have a Cheder and could cater for kids in a way that we couldn't really.

Track A: 0:16:50:0 – 0:17:47:0 Commitment ceremonies.

There was a whole hoo-ha around commitment ceremonies, not for us, but during that time I was being part-time Rabbi at Finchley, the Reform movement was trying to decide whether it was ever going to acknowledge same-sex commitment ceremonies. I participated in a lot of discussions in other congregations and was sickened mostly by the level of discourse and came running back to BKY for shelter, because it was a relief to get back there, where I did not have to put up with all that rubbish. So that went on for quite a while.

Track A: 0:17:48:0 – 0:22:24:0 Access to Judaism course.

I wanted to talk about one thing we did do, we did it 3 years running, we did an Access to Judaism course, which was for people who wanted to choose to be Jewish or people who just wanted to learn. I did it with Shulamit first and then with Shulamit and Janet but Shulamit and I designed the first one, it was one of the loveliest experiences, it was really wonderful. We didn't do it as a once a week class. We did 5 modules of the course in a year, that is 5 very intensive weekends, geared around festivals. So the courses would run Friday evening, Saturday morning, afternoon, evening, all day Sunday. It was really cross-disciplinary, we tried to integrate the festivals, the texts, the history, learning about Midrash. They were very tightly-integrated modules, we had a hell of a lot of fun planning them and they worked like a charm. So I've heard, that they worked beautifully and 5 weekends came out to be like 60 hours, over the whole time, which was as much as anybody did on a conversion course.

We'd go out and eat, we'd share food, we'd have Shabbat together, it was just lovely. We worked like dogs and we designed the whole course, then we had to design each bit of each module, who was

doing what and it was an awful lot of work but I've still got it all and for a community that can take that kind of time, it's the best possible way you can do it. It was just great, I think we ran it for three years running. It was in the 1990s, probably the last 90s.

There were a very varied bunch who attended, including a number of gay people and some people who were patrilineally Jewish, there were quite a few patrilineal Jews, some of whom were very, very angry at the idea that they would have to go through some formal affirmation process, conversion process almost, which would include doing the course. So they did the course as well, and we had at some point a mother and a gay son doing it together in the same bunch, straight couples, it was all very various, really quite wonderful. And we were able to use premises up at the Sternberg Centre, we could use rooms at the College, cos it was Friday night, Saturday and Sunday when the College wasn't there, so we could use those premises. There were about 15 people at a time, about that. Those courses were certainly the best experiences, from working on the planning with Shulamit, to working out the details to actually doing it. That was real Jewish education in the best possible sense, because they were mature, there was no talking-down, it was challenging, it was exciting, that was good. They stopped because there was no take-up after a while, so we just didn't, or certainly I didn't have the courage to do it, it just didn't happen in the new millennium.

Track A: 0:22:25:0 – 0:24:58:0 Other Rabbis at Beit Klal Yisrael

I'm not the Rabbi at BKY now, I'm the Rabbi Emeritus. It seemed to me to have reached a sort of steady-state, that is it wasn't growing but it wasn't declining either. It felt to me less radical, but then the whole world did, so that was no news. I felt that I was running out of steam. Not to do with BKY, just me personally. In the event I think I was getting ill, which I didn't know, but I was exhausted. So the last few years were in some ways quite hard but there was a wonderful, wonderful 70th birthday party that was really glorious and then when I decided I had to retire I was glad we got David Mitchell as a student Rabbi for a year and then we got Judith which was (kissing hand sound) I couldn't have asked for more, who's still the Rabbi there and is splendid in all kinds of ways. For me it was a kind of, I personally felt like I was running on flat tyres, really truly exhausted. But as I said I suspect I was getting ill. I didn't realise it. It was hard to leave at the same token I was glad not to have the responsibility any more. Still good stuff, still doing good stuff. Mizmoch Elohim.

Track A: 0:24:59:0 – 0:26:50:0 Invisibility and last words

I feel like Rainbow Jews is important as a project because I'm sick to death of us being invisible. I have to say I don't like giving interviews and it's quite an effort for me. It seems to me in the past 20 years or so, there's been somebody or bodies following me and other lesbian feminists, other feminists around with wet brooms, wiping out all the footsteps behind us. I don't want us to disappear again and I would like us to be present in the present and in history in all our particularity, not just "they're just like everybody else except the gender of the partners is different". It's not like that, it's wholly different. Like my lesbian politics are not like other politics. Being a lesbian has to do with a whole lot more than that I would have a female partner if I had a partner. It's a whole other ball game. And I don't want that to disappear. I don't want the feminism to disappear. So it's in the interests of keeping it, it's in the interests of not wanting our history to disappear.

Thank you very much.

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