

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW – Rabbi Mark Solomon

[Two shot Intro.]

Surat.

Hello, this is the Rainbow Jews Project. I am Surat Knan and we're here at the Montagu Centre on Friday the 28th June. We've got Rabbi Mark Solomon with us here. Mark, would you just briefly introduce yourself to us?

Mark.

Yes, I'm Rabbi Mark Solomon. I'm the interfaith consultant for Liberal Judaism, based here in the Montagu Centre, but I also have small congregations in Edinburgh, Manchester and Leicester which I visit once a month, and I teach Talmud at Leo Beck College.

[Interview with Mark Solomon]

Surat.

Hello, my name is Surat Knan and we are here at Rainbow Jews, at the Montagu Centre in London, and today is the 28th of June 2013, and I have got Rabbi Mark Solomon with me today. Thanks, Mark, for coming in. Would you be so kind and just introduce yourself briefly... some background information on yourself?

Mark.

Okay. Well, I'm Rabbi Mark Solomon. I'm a Liberal Rabbi and work for Liberal Judaism as an interfaith consultant. I also have small congregations in Edinburgh, Manchester and Leicester which I visit once a month, and I'm a Lecturer at Leo Baeck College in Finchley. So they're all my jobs. I'm travelling around constantly doing those sorts of things.

Surat.

Yeah. Were you born in London?

Mark.

No. I was born in Sydney and I lived, more or less, my first twenty-five years in Australia and a bit in Israel, and then I came to London twenty-five years ago. And I've just turned fifty, two days ago, so that's exactly half my life, really. And I came over to finish my rabbinic studies at a college called Jews College in Hendon and that's where I was ordained as a Rabbi in 1991.

Surat.

Right, so happy birthday again. And hopping back into your childhood... Could you tell us a little bit more about your family? How you grew up? Parents? Life in Sydney?

Mark.

Sure. Okay. So, um, my parents were both born in Australia. In fact we are fifth generation Australian on both sides, except for one English Grandfather who

gives me the right to live in England. And my Parents were very ordinary traditional Jews who went to an Orthodox synagogue, well not strictly Orthodox. My Father had no religious upbringing, my Mother was much more involved with Jewish life. So they brought me up to be very involved with the synagogue and going to Hebrew classes, three times a week. But, um, they weren't strictly religious. I had one sister who was slightly younger than me and we had a very happy traditional Jewish home. But, by the time I was about ten/eleven I'd decided I wanted to be really religious. I was very inspired by my Rabbi at the great synagogue in Sydney, which was the congregation where my parents were very involved and I was becoming very involved.

And so, yeah, starting from high school really I started wearing a Kippah whenever I went into high school, without telling my parents. So I took it off when I came home and put it on when I went to school, until one day I was discovered and all hell broke loose. My Father was very upset, because to him that was too extreme, and there were many other stories like that with me being too religious at that young age. Um, and throughout my teens I basically got more and more religious. By the time I was about fourteen I knew I wanted to be a Rabbi and so that was really my life long ambition. As I said I was very inspired by my Rabbi in Sydney with whom I grew up from the age of nine and he came to the community.

Surat.

So, in what way, or how did topics like sexuality, gender and so on and so forth feature in your teenage years and family life?

Mark.

In family life it didn't feature at all, but I don't remember it ever being talked about. My parents were quite old parents for the 1960s as they were thirty-seven when they got married. And so I guess they were a bit reticent about those sorts of issues, perhaps more than the younger parents might have been, I don't know. Um, I was aware from again the age of fourteen I guess that I was attracted to men, but it was something frightening and horrifying. Sexuality itself was a big problem at that time of my life. I was trying to be very devout and religious and, uh... Well, a little story from my Bar Mitzvah... Like many boys then and perhaps now I was given not one copy but two copies of the code of Jewish Law with English translation, which covers all kinds of things and there's some chapters in there that talk about sex. And there's one chapter that talks about masturbation and what a terrible, shocking, horrific sin it is and it's as bad as murder, and all sorts of things like that. And you know it really... affects you at that age. And so I spent many years with deep, deep worries and fears and insecurities about sexuality. Generally masturbation and homosexuality was almost like a side issue, but it was always definitely there more and more strongly from, as I say, from, in my awareness, from about fourteen.

Um, looking back I was in some ways the stereotypical gay boy. I was always very, very short, anyway, don't know if that's stereotypical but, you know, I always had this strong aversion to sport or anything rough and tumble, and I was a book-worm, loved reading and classical music and all that sort of thing. My best

friends at school - I had two particularly close friends with whom I am still very close - and we formed a strong friendship from about the age of twelve onwards. We became pretty inseparable. And right through we shared many tastes and interests in, deep interests in religion. They weren't Jewish but, you know, we were doing our very own interfaith dialogue from an early age, and um... of course many years later after we'd left school it turned out that we were all gay. But we had never talked about it, never acknowledged it, while we were at school all those years.

Surat.

So when was your first experience in terms of dating, or any experience with a boy, or mainly in homosexuality?

Mark.

I was a very late starter. My very first experience with anybody was when I was twenty-one. It's not something I can say very much about, but it was an interesting experience..., but it was fairly isolated. It happened a few times with that particular person, but pretty much there was nothing else, nobody else, and it wasn't really until my mid-twenties after I'd come to live in England that things started to change and I really started coming out. It was only one relative I could talk to about it when I was young, as I said, in my twenties, early twenties. It was only one relative whom I was very close to, and was very wise and understanding. And apart from that I never spoke about it to anyone in my family at that age and maybe only very hesitantly to a few very close friends. But I wasn't really ready to come out. I wasn't -I didn't -there wasn't a gay identity. As I say, for much of the time I was deeply religious.

After I finished school I went off to Yeshiva, which is a really intensely Orthodox college where you studied with other young guys, literally all day, for many, many hours studying together; religious texts. And it's an all-male environment. It was very intense. I had lots of crushes on other boys but nothing ever happened. There were stories of other people with whom things happened but nothing for me, sadly. I could talk to some of the Rabbis about some of the stages of sexuality that I was very concerned about, like masturbation, but I never mentioned anything about homosexuality. That just would have been a step too far, too risky for me at the time to talk about in that environment. So, when I was nineteen or twenty I had a big crisis and I kind of abandoned Judaism for a while. A religious crisis... I was in Israel studying and I... There was certain aspects of Orthodox Judaism I had come to find completely unacceptable, and as a result I kind of fled from Judaism all together and spent several years exploring other paths. As it turned out there were lots of gay guys around me at that time of my life in sort of churchy circles especially, but sexuality again was not something we really talked about much. It was just sort of there in the background as an atmosphere, but I, speaking for myself, it was not something that was ever... a big part of my life [at that time]. I was trying to be very holy and devout and to be gay was too scary. And then I came back to Judaism, in my mid-twenties. I became quite religious again and decided 'yes'. I did still want to be a Rabbi and that's when I came over to London to study at College, which was a modern Orthodox Rabbinical seminary, which at that point was headed by Jonathan

Sacks who shortly after became Chief Rabbi, so I was one of his students at College.

Surat.

And at that time, around that time when you were studying at this particular college, did your sexual identity come in in any way?

Mark.

Yeah. Well, that's when I really started coming out. It may have been that I was in my mid-twenties and I think that's a time when a lot of people start to get real about their lives and growing up. And so I think it was a part of growing up. It might have also been something to do with being so far away from home, very much on my own - in the summer of 1989 to be specific, after my first year at Jews College. That's when the whole...all the sexualities started welling up and becoming absolutely unavoidable. At that point I had just been avoiding it for many, many years, telling myself it was a phase I was going through for a very long time.

When I was involved with the Lubavitch movement, the ultra-orthodox community, people have arranged marriages. So I always thought, 'well, they'll find me a wife and everything will be fine and all of these unpleasant thoughts will go away'. So that was something that I comforted myself with for a while. But as I say it was summer in '89 and, um, a lovely hot summer, not like we have nowadays, and a film called "Torch Song Trilogy" came out in London, which I went to see. I was going to see any films that were gay related at that point and I was blown away by "Torch Song Trilogy" specifically because the main character in it is Jewish, a New York Jewish Drag Queen, very powerfully Jewish and extremely gay. And this was the very first thing I'd ever come across which brought Jewish and Gay together in one place. They always seemed like two utterly separate roles that had no connection. And so I'd never been able to make a connection for myself. Being Jewish was the main thing that was my identity, going to be a Rabbi. Being gay was just this really unpleasant thing that I tried ignore as much as possible. But, I - I went to see "Torch Song Trilogy" three times in the first week or something. I was just blown away by it and it had a powerful affect I think as a catalyst in helping me to think more about myself, and start to realize who I was. The main result of it at that point was that I got intensely depressed, very, deeply depressed, because it just seemed hopeless. I couldn't see any future.

My whole life - well, for years on and off - had been working towards being an orthodox Rabbi, and this was not going to fit in with that at all. So I just couldn't see what possibilities were for me. There were very few people I could talk to about it, but the really positive thing which happened in the next few months was I contacted Rabbi Lionel Blue. I knew about him before, and by that time I had read one of his books. It wasn't one of his most explicitly gay books, but it was clearly there in the subtext; his sexuality. He had come out in 1988 publicly, so just before I'd got to England that summer of '88 he came out. So, it was kind of still there in the news sort of thing. And when I read his book I felt, you know, I felt his personality come through so strongly and that he was someone that I

could really talk to, who would understand what I was going through. He knew the Jewish side and the Gay side and so forth. So I eventually got in touch with him. I think it was the very beginning of 1990 probably when I got in touch with him, and went to see him. He began helping me to put my life back together; of course things were looking very grim. I was trying to study and hold it all together but it was very hard. He started introducing me to people who were outside the Orthodox Jewish community whom I didn't have to hide things with. In fact he started involving me in some of his own activities, in particular he was involved with an interfaith annual retreat for people with HIV/AIDS and their carers. At that time it was a pretty unique thing. There was not much else happening around that time of a religious nature for people with AIDS. So it was Lionel with a very wonderful Christian priest and a number of other fantastic people. So he invited me to join the team and be involved in that. It was...took place somewhere in Somerset once a year, and that was a very powerful experience for me, maybe [it was] quite a big part of my coming out as well being with these guys. It was then mostly guys...As the years went on, the mix of people there changed a lot. A lot of African women started coming as well, but in the early days it was mostly gay guys and, um, it was all very out there. People were dying. There was not much treatment in those days. The treatments there were, were horrible, and so people were really facing their deaths. And being with people facing my sexuality in that context was very powerful for me. And, oh yes, so gradually things started changing. I got involved with, well, very hesitantly with JGLG in those early days. I started coming to the odd JGLG meeting. My very first JGLG meeting I ever came to, which was the men's pub evening at the King's Arms, I met someone and fell in love. That was pretty dramatic.

Surat.

Why was it dramatic?

Mark.

We fell in love but it didn't last long. It was very nice. huh?

Surat.

Why was it dramatic? Was there a particular situation where...

Mark.

Well, you know, the first time you go into, you know... I wasn't expecting that, um... And there was another group in those days as well, called Hineni, which was for younger Jewish gay guys, as there was a persistent perception, unfortunately, that JGLG was for older guys and wasn't always comfortable for young guys. So it was when I was still young I got involved with Hineni as well. And there was [sic] some fantastic people, men and women, involved in that and so I made some wonderful friendships there too, and I could share, you know, share religious things with them and do Hanukah stuff for them, and do other religious stuff for them. So, yeah, there was a lot of process. Lionel sent me along to his psychotherapist so I had long periods of psychotherapy, which was very hard, confronting all kinds of things in those early days..., coming out. The big question was why? Why am I gay? What happened? You know..Was it something

in my life? So, you know... trying to go back and sort out everything. Ultimately, those questions sort of fall away once you've accepted this is just who I am, but in those early stages that was a big, big question for me.

Surat.

So, your rabbinic career how was that? Around that time you said you started to getting involved in Jewish LGBT groups and issues. What went on parallel with your career?

Mark.

Well, I was studying at College. I was –it was very difficult. I was living a double life, effectively, more and more as the months went on. It seemed like an eternity over the years: '90, '91 and '92. I spent a lot of time being very depressed, so it was very difficult to focus on my studies. But you know, I carried on. I mean, I remember times when I just couldn't go out of the house. I was...by this time I was a student Rabbi in Watford living in a flat above Watford United Synagogue, and I was studying very intensively with one other guy. We were study partners, because we were way ahead of everybody else in at College. So, it was just us. So, I was going over to his place and there were times where I just couldn't do it. I couldn't face anybody. One time he called the police to go around and check, because I wasn't answering the phone or anything. So that gives you kind of an idea of... I was pretty depressed at certain points along the way, just because of the conflict of a sense of not knowing which way my life could possibly go.

But things eventually got better, as they do. And, uh... by late 1991 I reached a very important turning point. The big...the big issue for me being 'Yeah, can I live as an Orthodox Jew and be gay or is that impossible?' But I couldn't bring myself emotionally and intellectually to accept any other kind of Judaism, because I was so indoctrinated I suppose with an Orthodox approach to God and to the Torah. And that changed quite dramatically and suddenly for me. In December 1991, I read two books, more or less, at the same time. One was the novel "The Colour Purple" by Alice Walker, which was the most amazing book for anyone who hasn't read it, and the other was a book of Jewish feminist theology by Judith Plaskow, called "Standing Again At Sinai." And these two both intensely feminist books both presented, one in a poetic, fictional [language] and the other in a very academic theological way, presented a radically different way of thinking about God, especially. I had a very patriarchal view of God, as a law giver and, you know. Being gay was always unacceptable to God; guilty, dirty, all of that sort of thing, and these wonderful feminist books showed me there are, there's another way of looking at God, and much more positive, much more nurturing, much more profound, and much truer. And getting rid of that patriarchal rubbish.... It absolutely turned my head around, and suddenly I was able to see a way through, and see that there are other ways of being Jewish as a non-patriarchal, non-orthodox, better, truer, and –and –and –in which I could survive. So, that really empowered me to take the final steps of coming out.

I've skipped over lots of stuff. I'd come out to my parents already. By that time, in 1990, I came out to my parents. That was very tough. I had a good friend who was a Carmelite Friar and a Catholic Priest. I met him in those years when I was

exploring other things, and he'd been coming out as well. He was about six months ahead of me in the coming out process, in the various steps that we were both taking. He'd come out to his parents and he was seeing a psychotherapist in Sydney, who'd helped him a lot. So, I visited Sydney, where my parents were of course, and he said "you have to go and see my psychotherapist" so I did. Totally different approach to the one I had in London, chalk and cheese. And he really challenged me and helped me to take that leap of telling my parents.

I'd always had a really bad relationship with my Father all way back to those days where I had become too religious for him, and we became very alienated from one another, very angry relationship. So, I thought he'd just get very angry with me or refuse to talk to me at all. I was much closer to my Mum. In the event, my Father especially reacted far, far better than I would ever have imagined, because I did think that he would be someone who was quite homophobic. You know, he made the odd homophobic comments over the years. So, I was quite anxious, but he took it very, very calmly. As soon as I started, I sat them down, and said, 'I have something to tell you', having had a few stiff whisky's before. He started making notes, which was the last thing that I expected him to do, and the following night my mother, who was very subdued and a bit tearful about it all, cried a bit, she said: "Your Father wants to talk to you". Oh dear, and we sat down in the kitchen and had the first proper adult conversation that I'd ever had with him. I was twenty-seven at that point. And from that point our relationship was transformed. I don't think he was every very happy that I was gay, but in that conversation he told me things about his life and some challenges that he'd had, which he dealt with, and he hoped I could deal with this. I think he meant by 'deal with it' to get over it kind of thing but I explained "No. This is not –it's not like that, it's not something you get over, it's just who I am". But we didn't fight, we didn't shout and we kind of reached this sort of understanding, which lasted the rest of his life, and that was amazing.

And almost every time someone comes out to someone it had a very positive affect on the relationship, as it's bound to do when you're being yourself finally, as someone who isn't hiding who they really are. So, I'm a great believer in coming out. I know it's not always right for everyone or every occasion, but I see it as so transformative and releasing so much energy and goodness and truth that it's almost always the right thing to do.

So, anyway, that was my parents, and then I still had this long journey to go about my Rabbinic identity, and so I've described to you this feminist insight and I was, kind of, always convinced gay liberation follows on and depends upon women's liberation. That the two are intimately linked, historically and morally, and that we as gay people owe so much to women who have gone forward [before and] asserted what it means to be a liberated woman, and that enabled gay people you know, back in the '50s, '60s and onwards to explore what gay liberation could mean.

Anyway, so having got to that point I then decided, yeah, I'm going to give my notice at Watford and try to find another thing to do as a Rabbi, but not in Orthodox Judaism. So, in January 1992 I went to see Jonathan Sacks, my former

teacher, who was by then Chief Rabbi, quite early in his days as Chief Rabbi. It was just supposed to be a routine interview to see how I was getting on, but I dropped the bombshell too, and said I'm leaving the United Synagogue because I'm homosexual. I don't think I used the word 'gay' in that particular conversation. And he was quite shocked, as you could imagine, because you know I was a young Rabbi of some promise, and I'd been his student and we'd been quite close, as teacher and student. So, I'll describe, briefly, what happened: he then said, "Let me understand what you're saying. Do you mean that you're homosexual and you're happy with that, or do you mean you're homosexual but you're unhappy about it and you might like to change it? Or do you mean you think you might be homosexual but you're not sure?" And I was shaking... the nerves... this whole time when I said "I'd have to say A" and he said "Oh my god." And then he launched into a talk about why he thinks Judaism and homosexuality are not compatible, but ultimately he was quite decent and he –he treated me quite well in that...on that occasion. He allowed me to work out my six months' notice at Watford, which was nice of him and he wished me well.

So that's what I did I gave my notice in to Watford and looked around for other rabbinic jobs. I went to the Masorti movement and had a meeting with –I was quite friendly with one of the leading Masorti Rabbis. He'd encouraged me to have a meeting with the chairman of the Masorti Movement. We had a lovely conversation, over lunch, and he said "Oh I'll get back to you" and I thought that meant maybe in a week or two weeks, he got back to me an hour or two later that afternoon to say "I'm sorry, but we're not ready for a gay Rabbi in the Masorti Movement". So that was that. So then I went to the Reform Movement and had an interview with a director of the Reform Movement, who was very nice and very positive and suggested a couple of places I could go for interviews, which I did, but nothing was going to work out. Not because of the gay issue but just there were no proper jobs that were suitable for me at that time in the movement for Reform Judaism. And people had said to me "don't bother with liberals, because they're just too way out and you're too traditional and, you know, it won't work out." So, I didn't, foolishly.... All of this time, talking about the early months of 1992, the Jewish press were getting more and more interested in me. In the early months of '92, I think it was about March, there was the first big Jewish gay conference that took place at Belsize Square Synagogue. It was quite a major event for the Jewish community to discuss homosexuality, and I was already involved in various groups and things. And so I was there and, I think, in the course of that day I had rather naively chatted to a couple of journalists without –not exactly come out, probably, but it was all very clear what I was doing there.

And so the New Moon magazine, which was a magazine that existed in the Jewish community then, and was like the trendy Jewish magazine, made a mention of me in an article, not by name but it mentioned a young Orthodox Rabbi who was going to come out. This was in the context of bad things happening in Jonathon Sacks' Chief Rabbinate time. So that was pretty scary and then the editor of the Jewish Chronicle of the time started pressuring me to come out. He'd ring me and say "you've really got to do this. It's got to be on the record, important". He was ringing me from Israel, and he was ringing me from all over the place and putting

lots of pressure as any journalist can and I was not happy about, or didn't feel particularly ready to do that. But it came to the point where it was clearly going to happen, whether I liked it or not, basically. So, very reluctantly in the summer of 1992 I agreed to go on record and give a statement to the Jewish Chronicle. I rang Jonathon Sacks to let him know what was about to happen, and then I went off to Australia to... for my yearly visit home. And I knew this was going to happen while I was away, and I thought 'that's my career down the drain then', you know, 'that's the end of that'. It was a difficult feeling. In the event what happened was... one of the things that happened as a result was I got a phone call from Leo Beck College saying, 'there was a liberal congregation that was interested meeting you, they might want you as their Rabbi'. And it turned out they wanted a slightly more traditional Rabbi, and read about me coming out and leaving the United Synagogue, and thought I might be interesting. So, it was directly as a result of that that I got the job as a Liberal Rabbi with West Central Liberal Synagogue - which is in this building, in the Montagu Centre as it's known now, well it always was the Montagu Centre - yes so it as thanks coming out to the Jewish Chronicle that I ended up in the Liberal Movement. That was twenty-four years ago or something, twenty-three, twenty-four years ago and I've been really happy in Liberal Judaism ever since. It proved to be just the right religious home for me, you know, a few hiccups along the way, especially with my congregations who were sometimes a bit uncomfortable with how out I became, giving interviews - and after that I became this total media whore, giving interviews to this magazine and that magazine and TV programs and you name it. So, yes, sometimes the congregation they were not very happy, because they didn't want to be viewed as a gay synagogue with a gay Rabbi.

So 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, though of course there were two lesbian Rabbis also who had recently come out and were doing great things, mainly in the Reform Movement of that time. So, yeah, once again, coming out proved to be the right thing to do, and of course once you're that out there's nothing to be afraid of. Well, there's not that much to be afraid of anymore and people were mostly much more positive and much more friendly than I expected, including most of my former Orthodox congregants who were very supportive, and with some of them friendly, all these years later.

Surat.

So in this new life of yours a sense of coming out and changing into a Liberal Rabbi, how different do you feel in your LGBT life has become, in terms of have you been involved in any projects or anything on the LGBT scene or campaigns?

Mark.

Yeah, loads over the years. The first big thing I suppose I got involved with was with JGLG, and I started being involved in the monthly Chavurah monthly service on the last Friday, which at that time was in Golders Green [Alyth Gardens], just happened to be the next street from where I was living after I left Watford. So, I was the one who had the key to open the room every month, because I was living on the doorstep. And then when the new Montagu Centre, this building, was

opened the Liberal Movement were looking for activities to come and fill the building, and I proposed that the Chavurah - which had been going downhill a bit by that point in Golders Green - should move to the centre of town and take place at the Montagu Centre every month. And I was by that time of course the Rabbi of West Central, and so I facilitated that happening and am really proud of having helped that to happen and get JGLG into the home of Liberal Judaism, as it were. And that's been a good relationship ever since.

And then in '93 there was a big Jewish gay conference in London of the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organisations. They had international conferences every second year, almost always in the United States, but this going to be in London, which is still, to this day, the only international gay conference that has ever happened in London. So, I was on the team, the big team of volunteers preparing that. I was specifically on the team that were preparing the religious aspects of the conference and the workshops as well. And the religious group were responsible for the big Friday night service at the conference, and we produced this booklet for the big service. It was ... the thirteenth of these annual conferences so we called the "Bar/Bat Mitzvah conference" so the "Bar/Bat Mitzvah" celebration of the World Congress, coming of age. And, um, we produced this special Friday night service, and JGLG has been using it ever since for their monthly service. We will be using it tonight for our pre-Pride service twenty years on from 1993. So, I'm pretty chuffed about that, I wrote some special prayers for it as well. So that was a big thing. It was actually also through preparing for that conference I met the guy who would be my partner for twelve years. Of course, he was also a volunteer, so we had to work together and that's how we came to be together for twelve years.

There had been many other things over the years; activities, obviously for the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group. A lot of writing -like writing articles about my own experience, being gay and in other places about being Jewish and gay. That's been quite a big part of it as well. Possibly, the most significant aspect of that work was within Liberal Judaism on gay commitment ceremonies -same sex commitment ceremonies. In the mid to late 90s become a very, very contentious issue within Reform Judaism, painfully so. It had almost ripped the Reform movement apart, and had brought out a huge amount of latent homophobia that I don't think anybody realized was still there, within the progressive Jewish community. And I had been very involved in that process even though I was a Liberal Rabbi. I was often invited to take part in discussions in Reform Synagogues. They had meetings in every Reform synagogue to discuss the issue of should Liberal [sic Progressive] Judaism allow same sex commitment ceremonies, and almost unanimously the response was "No". But I was always speaking on the other side which was a really uncomfortable, painful experience, in the target of quite a lot of ugly homophobia in some places.

And in the wake of that, I then raised the issue in the Liberal movement, because it had never really been that much of a discussion in Liberal Judaism up to that point. But I think it was around 1999, or thereabouts, I raised at our annual Rabbinic shallat, our annual retreat of liberal Rabbis, and we had a session about it. And right from that very first session when I presented a list of pros and cons

for same sex commitment ceremonies the atmosphere was so different from what I'd encountered within Reform Judaism. ...Not everyone was thrilled about the idea. There were lots of issues, lots of doubts and hesitations, but there was no rejection, no homophobia. There was a real acceptance that this was an issue of justice and fairness, which should be taken seriously and it was so strengthening for me, as a Liberal Rabbi, that my colleagues were so ready to –to approach this in an open and fair and friendly way. And the issue then moved forward through meetings and group work, work in groups and so forth, to the point where a couple of years afterwards the Liberal Rabbis and the Liberal movement said we embrace the idea of same sex commitment ceremonies. And we brought out a big, quite substantial report about the whole issue, looking at it from every possible angle. Several Liberal Rabbis were involved in that, both LGBT Rabbis and straight Rabbis. And once the report was out, and the principle had been accepted, we then got to work on creating a liturgy a service for commitment ceremonies, and notice they/we still weren't using the terminology of marriage. To actually use the word 'marriage' at that point was a step too far, it was going to alienate people and cause problems, so we used this vocabulary of commitment ceremonies. But we had, sort of, a principle agreement that a commitment ceremony could include all the major rituals that characterized Jewish weddings; the *huppah*, *kiddushin*, and the wine, all the traditional things. So, I was the editor leading the group that was producing this covenant of love liturgy, which was eventually published, as it turned out in December 2005, and coincided with civil partnerships coming into force in England and Wales, and it just worked out that we were moving in parallel with the country and the Government, the Labour Government at the time, and it all fitted in really well. Of course, since then Liberal Judaism has gone further and embraced all marriage equality and so we have to do a second addition of this that says marriage on the cover. It actually says marriage in Hebrew here, for those who understand the Hebrew, as well as *berit ahava*, the covenant of love, which we chose to characterize what we felt this ceremony was about.

Surat.

So have you, yourself as a Rabbi conducted any of these ceremonies?

Mark.

Loads, loads over the years. I mean long before this existed I was doing commitment ceremonies right from the early '90s onwards, I guess. For men, for women; and all kinds of interesting experimental liturgies and some quite big weddings as it happens. There was one in particular, a lesbian wedding I did where I was Rabbi at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in St. John's Wood that was filmed as part of a BBC documentary that and other things. Yeah, it didn't exactly get me into any trouble with the Liberal Jewish synagogue, but it hadn't yet been agreed to so they were a bit, you know: "Is this really the right thing at this point?" But yeah, that was quite fun that I was on TV doing a big lesbian wedding...

Surat.

As a... last question: what is your personal view on this same sex marriage legislation at the moment that is going through the UK, from a Jewish perspective?

Mark.

I think it is absolutely marvellous. It's a matter of fairness and justice, obviously, for couples who are together and whose relationship is a marriage, and is to be recognised legally and religiously as a marriage. So, it's a great significance for those individual couples and for their life together and their legal rights and their social status and the way their relationship is honoured, and that's all absolutely important. But, beyond that this is probably the last really major rung in establishing LGBT equality generally, even for people who are not married, not getting married any time soon. Still, the fact that we are able to get married, that the law, please god, in a few weeks or months or whatever will recognise and accept that. That is a statement that we are equal. That same sex love is as important, as nourishing, as positive for not only for individuals, but also for society as a whole, as any loving relationship that can help to serve as a building block of society.

Surat.

Any plans for yourself to get married?

Mark.

Please god by me... and not with anybody right now. I've had a very wonderful loving relationship that, unfortunately, ended last year. We're still very good friends, which is nice, but no I'm on my own at the moment, so... I hope that will change at some point.

Surat.

Mark thank you so much for sharing your story with us. As a last thing: if you had to summarise your LGBT Jewish experience in some sort of a message, you know, a very short message to the world, what would you say?

Mark.

For me, accepting that I am gay was accepting that is how I can love people, not just in a sexual sense, but that is the way I offer love to anybody in the world, because I'm gay and because I have that capacity to love in that way. And it releases so much energy that is positive for one's self and positive for everyone you're in contact with. So, I would say that coming out... be proud of who you are. Accepting who you are and who everybody else is, is the way to build a constructive and happy and positive life.

/comment SRK the final paragraph might have to go further up in story?/

Surat.

Thank you.

[Two shot Outro.]

Surat.

Mark, is there any message, any sort of, to sum up your LGBT Jewish experience, what message would you actually convey to the world?

Mark.

I think that, for me, coming out is the most important creative step one can take to release energy and goodness and love, not only for one's self, but also for friends and the people around you and for the whole world. It's to be proud and accepting who we are.

Surat.

Thank you.