

1) FIRST SESSION

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. Umm I was ordained 24 years ago and um 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 um, that's pretty much it for my introduction.

Surat:

Thank you. Peggy?

Peggy:

I am Peggy Sherwood, um I am president of the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group JGLG, um 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:

Er I'm Sacha and I live in Camden Town. Er I'm a member of er, JGLG, er 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. Um, but before that to lesbian community, Jewish lesbians back to the beginning of the 1980s. Um 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, um, I don't know, my involvement with the LGBT community is fairly limited. Um I've had, I, I used to be a member of, um, JGLG, but it is a London based group and I live in Brighton which has meant that, um, I found it awkward to participate in lots of its events. So, um, my involvement is mostly through the things that we do with synagogue in Brighton.

Surat:

Ok. Thank you. Peggy?

Peggy:

Well, er 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, um and er, it primarily it is a social but it also has er a monthly havurah and um, it is an opportunity to go to a synagogue service that is exclusively LGBT, which is great actually.

Surat:

So what does a havurah entail?

Peggy:

Ahh, a havurah, I think the true meaning is meeting a friend, something like that, Elli? Um, and so it's a service, an hourly service which is lead by an out lesbian or gay Rabbi. Um and then afterwards, as all Jews do, we like to eat, so it's a, it's a supper where everybody brings something to eat and share and its 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, not a religious person. My involvement with, I feel very Jewish but, er, I don't belong to a synagogue. Um, my involvement with the Jewish life is mostly, probably, through the Jewish gay group, er and also through my, my Jewish friends, many Jewish friends. Um, but ah, on the gay side I belong to the London gay men's chorus and that's er, er, it takes up a lot of my time, putting on shows and doing, in the background, political work.

Surat:

Alright, thank you. So going, er, a little bit back in your lives, um lets talk about er, your background, starting maybe from upbringing or any significant experiences in your, in your early lives that you, that you, you know 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. Um, 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. Um 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. Um 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, um, I didn't get very far I mean I tried a couple of boys that were sort of hoisted on me and I sort of escaped by marrying somebody via my family, it was sort of related by marriage when I was nineteen because 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 sweat shop plays. Um 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, um, a divorce from my ex wife. And um, so, started my gay life relatively late. I was um; I was about thirty-three, um when I began to live, ah, a gay lifestyle. Um, I sort of pursued a conventional heterosexual lifestyle because growing up as I did in the sixties and seventies I didn't think that, um, one could live a, an acceptable, um, life, um, 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 apart of a family and religious group, um being Jewish etc. So...

Surat:

How was it coming out experienced for you?

Peter:

Well because, ahh, yeah, agh, it, err, hard to explain because I don't think I had a, you know, a particular moment where I came out. It was sort of a process having become divorced and, um, having made gay friends living in Brighton which has a very good, um, gay, um, 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, I think, the last ,um, bastion of coming out for me was, agh, with regards to my work and religion.

9:16

Surat:

The synagogue, er, Brighton Hove synagogue.

Peter:

Yes, yeah.

Surat:

OK. All right. Thank you. Peggy over here.

Peggy:

Um, well I guess, you know, I knew like many people, you know, that I was actually a lesbian. I knew from, er, when I was I guess in my teens, but I never unfortunately did anything about it and I had my first, um, sexual experience with a woman when I was, er, I think about 35, um, and You know, like, again like so many others I, I think I, 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, was mid 1990s when I met Elli, at a service I'd seen an advert in, um, 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, I went and I met her and she put me in touch with the Jewish Gay and Lesbian group. And, um, I was, 'you know I don't know, you know, I might meet somebody I know there or' and you know she sort of said 'well you know if you meet someone you know there, they're there for the same reason as you', which of course made perfect sense. Um, and I did go along and I was the only woman there and, um, just over the years, more and more women have joined and, and, ahh, 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, er, six years ago and, um, 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, covenant of love, why do you say that?

11:55

Peggy:

Well, you know in this country now, gay marriage is, is, on it's way but um 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, um, and Elli took the service and actually Rabbi Mark Solomon also took part and, um, sang very beautifully. And um, 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 talit, which is the prayer shawl that people wear in synagogue, um tied on to four poles because it was like a mobile Chuppah and it was in, we actually did it in Pinewood Studios actually, um, so it wasn't in a synagogue that wasn't a built chuppah but it's...

13:01

Elli:

It's very traditional to have a portable canopy.

Peggy:

Yes it's a canopy, that's, that's, thank you Elli. Um 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, its 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, a personal history.

13:42

Sacha:

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

Surat:

How old were you as a survivor?

Sacha:

Er, how old was I at what point?

Surat:

When you were hidden?

Sacha:

Well I was hidden, I suppose, I must have been about five, um, er, and then I went to a number of orphanages after the war. Er and eventually er my brother found some family we had in the UK and er, well to cut a long story short, I got adopted, er, by a family here. I was twelve and I started being a child again. Um my brother stays in France because he's five years older, to which he was well on his way with his studies, didn't want to start a fresh in UK, so we've lived across the channel for the rest of our lives. Um, and, er, 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 um, 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 er, to my great surprise I thought by the time I'm seventy, you know, life would be so on the wain for me 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 LGBT Jewish, um how far has, have both of these identities, lets call them, influenced your life, lives, 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 people 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-partite 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. Um but 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 its not the same as suddenly turning it into something where Jews somehow had to explain themselves. Um, and this is what began to happen and I already joined, um, 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 Heide 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 its going to be pretty tricky as a lesbian and really I can't speak the language. So came back and just as luck would happen, have it, I um I saw an advert, I saw an article in the Jewish chronicle, um that I never used to buy but my aunt and uncle had it and it said that there was a program (something) 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:

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

Peter:

Out.

Peggy:

...You wouldn't be out probably.

Elli:

Its slightly longer than twenty, it would be twenty five years

Peggy:

Well all right. Yeah probably.

Peter:

Well I didn't feel, I didn't feel up until about five years ago that, um, when I learned about Rabbi Elli and our synagogue in Brighton, I didn't feel that 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:

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

Surat:

Do you think that, um, you two talked of female perspective as such....Do you think there is a difference if your looking into LGBT Jewish lives? And we're saying that LGBT is standing for Lesbian and Gay Bisexual and Transgender and also queer and questioning people. Is that a different experience do you feel for 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 its an abomination in Leviticus chapter 18, so you've got a direct anti sort of expression of any male sexuality of two men together so which we don't have. On the other hand lesbians are invisible so it is a different experience.

Peter:

Well traditional Judaism women are sort of invisible.

Elli:

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

Surat:

Peggy?

Peggy:

Yeah, I I, you know, certainly nowadays my partner and I, you know, we belong to any 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 (????) 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 reformed movement initially, um 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 um and then speeded 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 um 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 were 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's its happening and now the reform in the last couple of years is also supported it so you're absolutely right. Um, you can but a lot of people don't know that can, you know that but there are a lot of people out there that don't know that there are synagogues that will welcome.

Surat:

Peter?

Peter:

Yeah I very much agree, um as Elli, as Rabbi Elli has described that 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 a 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, um, does condone it and does support it. So um, so I've only been affiliated with the synagogue for five years, because up until that point that I didn't know that um, that there was a synagogue that it was ok to be gay and Jewish. Once I found that out then I was very keen to become 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 and incisiveness in synagogues? What's your experience?

Sacha:

Well, er, as I've said before I don't have a great experience of synagogues because I don't go er, but I think its quite remarkable the er, speed at which changes have happened er and long may it continue. I think were almost at a point where we're certainly legally straight or gay, um now we've got to persuade people to go along with that. Er the shame is that er countries that don't have the same liberal attitudes as we have. And in Russia for example they're going back the other way and um are persecuting gays much more than they used to. And in the Cameroons 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 twenty eight 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, the Cameroons, um various African countries and Algeria. I want 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:

Um, never say never. They've already, they've already moved quite a lot. Um, 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 the trans issues 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 um, 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.

2) SECOND SESSION

Surat:

Hello and welcome to our second interview with members of Britain's Jewish LGBT community. My name is Surat Rathgeber Knan and I am the founder of the oral history project Rainbow Jews, celebrating LGTB Jewish history and heritage in the UK. We are here to explore the life experiences of Jewish LGBT people in the UK. In this group we listen to stories and viewpoints of some of the younger generation of pioneers. Here with me are representatives from London and Brighton. On the left, David and Alex and on my right, Jacob and David Tim. Before we start would you like to tell us a bit more about yourself.

David?

David:

Um, I'm David and I am originally from Northampton. I'm twenty-eight years old. I am now living in North London and I work for a communal organisation as a press officer.

Surat:

What about you Alex?

Alex:

Er my name is Alex. I'm forty-three. Er originally born in Leicester and I now live in London in Hackney.

Surat:

Thank you. Jacob?

Jacob:

My name is Jacob. I'm twenty years old. I am originally from London but I now live in Brighton. I am a student studying English literature and film.

David Tim:

My name is David Tim. Um, I was originally born in Iowa, I grew up in Indiana and I moved here when I was nineteen. I am now twenty-four and I work in game development.

Surat:

Thank you. So, um, David, could you tell us a little bit more about your LGBT Jewish identity and what it means to you currently. Are you involved in any groups or what do you do?

David:

Well starting with the Jewish side of my identity, I work in a communal organisation and that means I am very much in the community, I have to deal with other community organisations on a daily basis. Um I am a member of my home shule in Leicester, Leicester Progressive and I am currently looking for a shule in London. Um, I've never been involved in explicitly LGBT activities per se, but I've started to go to social events held by the Gay Jews in London Group.

Surat:

Gay Jews in London is a...?

David:

It's a sort of social er group for um Jews living in London. Um they meet for after work drinks and sometimes Friday night dinners and things like that.

2:42

Surat:

OK. Alex how does your Jewish and or LGBT life look at the moment?

Alex:

Er, they have been very separate. I um haven't really been members of groups that haven't crossed over until recently in London so now I am a member of the, er Lesbian and gay Jewish group in London. Er my partner is Jewish and I go to social events that are queer and Jewish and that's a new thing and a good thing, I think.

Surat:

Thank you. Jacob?

3:40

Jacob:

Er, similar to the other two, my Jewish life and LGBT life have been quite separate until now. Um within the Jewish world I volunteer for a Jewish youth organisation and that's my main involvement in Jewish community. And that community is very LGBT inclusive and educates LGBT issues but it's not strictly an LGBT organisation. Ah, so it, but in terms of strictly LGBT organisations I am beginning to become a part of some but I have only recently come out so I haven't had that much time to become apart of ones and so er it can be different to find LGBT organisations that are that

inclusive of bisexual people which I am so its about finding those kind of organisations.

Surat:

Thank you.

David Tim:

Um, I've just moved to London so I am still finding groups on both sides. I am still looking for a synagogue to go to as well as LGBTs groups and, but I am also looking for potential Jewish LGBT groups to become involved in. So it's all very new for me right now.

4:25

Surat:

All right. Thanks for sharing that. So going back a little bit further in your lives. David would you like to tell us a little bit more about your upbringing, you background and how did it all start?

David:

So, I grew up in a completely secular home where Judaism for me really was just a matter of heritage and little more and even then quite a vague concept of being Jewish. So you know, I have Jewish heritage and that was really it. I didn't have any involvement in the Jewish community whatsoever. Um that was basically my upbringing. Um, with regards to Judaism.

Surat:

You did a lot of travelling didn't you?

David:

Um yes, so um, having grown up in a place like Northampton, I was eager to explore and so when I was eighteen I actually moved to Turkey and I lived there for six years. I studied Turkish and I worked as a translator and it was during those six years that I actually connected quite deeply with my Jewish identity. Um, so that was a very important phase in my life.

Surat:

OK. Thanks for sharing that. Alex how about you?

5:21

Alex:

Um well I grew up in Leicester, which is a small-ish Jewish community, um. I was a member of the orthodox community. You were a member of the...

David:

Progressive community.

Alex:

...Progressive community also in Leicester. Um it was a culturally quite traditional Jewish home. I strongly identified as Jewish then, I still strongly identify as Jewish but I think being gay, I came out when I was around thirteen, so young, um I didn't see any representation of gay people in my Jewish community or wider Jewish community so in my head I think I unconsciously separated the two things out. There wasn't much, well there wasn't any overlap.

Surat:

OK. Alright.

Jacob:

Ah, I was brought up in South and North London and I was actually born to two mothers and one of um, my biological mother's partner died at the, when I was two years old and ah she consequently went into the closet while bringing me up, so I only found out about her identity when I was around fifteen years old and I was already been aware my whole life that I was bisexual. Ah so at the age of nineteen, I came out. It was nice for us to be honest to each other for the first time about those identities but I think there was definitely stuff around ah homophobia and bi phobia in the Jewish community ah which perhaps stopped both of us from being as open as we would have liked to have been. It's really lovely that now were at a time in our lives that we can be open about that stuff.

Surat:

OK. Yeah.

David Tim:

Um in my childhood I, we heavily grew up in the Jewish community so we went to synagogue most weekends um holidays and all of that. However, around the time that I was twelve, we moved further away from where the community was physically located and Judaism became something we did at home on Friday nights. So i spent most of my teenage years with Shabbat dinners every Friday, which my sister absolutely hated because she didn't get to go out. Um and then after that I've kind of come back in and out of it as I've moved around the world, so now I'm looking for to get more heavily involved in it now that I will be in one place for a while.

Surat:

So how do you feel um about Jewish and LGBT life in Britain? Do you think it's a good country to live in for you? Do you think you can live your identities in a, in an

adequate way that makes you happy and fulfilled? What's your sort of feeling about this?

8:17

David:

Um, personally speaking and having being only back a few years in the UK, I think its a great place to be to ah Jewish and LGBT. Um, I have had the benefit of living in a country where it's more difficult, though not impossible to be openly gay. Um it's probably more difficult to be more openly Jewish in that country. Um and being able to live in London and have these social groups and being able to make all these friends from different walks of life has been a great experience. I'm really looking forward to exploring it further so I can safely say its a really great place to be Jewish and LGBT, in my experience so far.

Surat:

A-huh. Yeah, any more voices?

Alex:

Yeah, I would agree with that. I mean I lived abroad for about twelve years. America, Northern Ireland and Ireland, and my experience I suppose of being Jewish in Ireland was that it was more difficult to be Jewish than to be gay just because there was very few Jewish people there. Coming to London is, um I think amazing, it's just the tipping point of numbers of people, both Jewish and now queer Jewish people. I think I bridged the generations' group that you've got. I am a little younger than the others and a little older than these guys but I think, um, had I, had I been in my twenties now in London, yeah it would be amazing.

Surat:

Mhmm

Jacob:

But I would say to add on to that, I think London is very special in that way and that being, even north London compared to South London when I lived there like I really felt very very different to people both because of my sexuality, and because of my Jewishness and it wasn't until I moved up to north London that I was able to find people like me and not be treated differently because of that. So yeah I do think it depends on location and also in terms of LGBT groups and LGBT organisations I think still a lot of work needs to be done about being inclusive of bisexual and transgender people. There's a lot of work that needs to be done there.

Surat:

We are going to talk about that in a moment.

Jacob:

I look forward to it.

10:41

David Tim:

Um for me it was kinda the opposite of Alex and David because growing up in America it was easier to be Jewish than gay by far, um though most people didn't necessarily know a lot about being Jewish, they must have felt indifferent whereas being gay you had to be very private and very quiet about it. I didn't actually come out until I moved to England, um partly because I had moved to England. Um when I got here it was great on both sides. I think the first time I went to a synagogue here, I think I got three invites home for dinner just because they wanted to be sure that I came home to somewhere for Shabbat dinner. Um and the LGBT community here always seems to have been accepted. I have never experience any problems when telling someone that I am gay, so.

11:22

Surat:

Mhmm. Alright. So to open up the discussion a little bit more. If you are thinking of the current climate here, like social political climate in terms of gay marriage coming, does that, what do you think about it in terms of from your Jewish perspective?

11:40

Alex:

Well it's such a core ah concept, and to what it is to be Jewish, the notion of family. I can't imagine what Jews would be without it being a central concept in how I think of myself as Jewish and so the notion that I could become a member of an institution which I know my family, my parents understand, that means that I feel reconnected to my parents they would understand my life if I had a partner even if she were female. If I were to get married they would understand that, it's a big part of being Jewish so for me being able to get married in this country, when that happens yeah that's really important. It's given me a sense of, um closure I think with my own Jewish family. Yeah

Surat:

Mhmm. Any more voices on that?

David:

Um, I think for me the whole same sex marriage um debate and its um, subsequent legislation um marks the end of a very long road. I mean when I was at school that was when Tony Blair was in power and he was pushing through the age of consent, um equalisation, getting rid of section twenty eight and then of course we had the anti discrimination legislation. I really feel like all of these things actually as a

teenager, as a young teenager when I first started to come to terms with my sexuality, these were the things that I couldn't imagine; I couldn't foresee, um especially marriage, for example. If you would have asked me when I was thirteen, fourteen you know what do you think of the whole same sex marriage, I probably wouldn't have even been warm to it, personally speaking. I would have found it a foreign concept as a gay person. Nowadays it's obviously much more, becoming more natural. Um I still don't know if I want to get married myself. I'm in a civil partnership actually and that's fine for me but the fact there are people out there who want to get married and there of course Jewish movements in this country er that are willing to carry out these marriages is a massive step forward.

13:35

Surat:

Do you think it makes a difference to have, to be able to have a marriages in places of worship, like a synagogue for example? Does that make a difference for you?

13:42

Jacob:

Yeah definitely. I knew synagogue held marriages before they were, before they were made legal, but I think it concerns me most in terms of like a piece of legislation that discriminates against certain people and that it exists and it should exist in that way and even personally I don't want to get married, I need to respect that some people are being denied that opportunity and that's not we should have in a law.

Surat:

Yeah.

David Tim:

Um, I'm really really happy about it actually because is part of what made it really difficult for me to accept my sexuality was that I always pictured my life getting married and having kids and all of that, um and it was kind of the coming to understand that being gay I could still have those things at least in some form and now soon I will be able to have those things in the same form as everybody else is what helped me accept it.

Surat:

Right. Yeah. So, um, again if you are looking at the current climate and if you had a vision, what do you think needs to be worked on? Either in the communities that you are in or you would like to be in? You already started talking about er gender, gender identities and the discourse. Would you like to expand on that?

Jacob:

Yeah. I think, i think the LGBT community has quite a bad history in the way that it has treated transgender people and I think that its only coming out now that this is like, this is an issue that needs to be dealt with and at least needs to be understood. Uh there is really lack of language around it and lack of understanding what certain terms mean and yeah I think that that's something that really needs to be um addressed and that um not seeing it as so but they're not like us they're trouble, they're um issues aren't like ours because in a heterosexist society we are all bunched together and that's how we need to look at it. That's why a term of queer exists because heterosexual and cisgender people create other us in that kind of way and we can only talk about activism in terms of those structures that exist already.

Surat:

That's actually interesting... Would you see yourself as a queer Jew or as a LGBT Jew or as any other? How would you, if you had to find the definition or...?

Alex:

Changes. I mean, I grew up under section twenty-eight. I was at school in section twenty eight and Tony Blair is part of my adult life not my kind of coming out life um and that use of language then was act up and outrage. I identified as queer that was part of my language then. It meant something then that I think it means something very different now. Lesbian meant something very different then, I didn't identify as lesbian, I identified as queer because of politics that were current then but now I think I identify as lesbian and not queer. I think the language changes.

16:52

David:

I've actually never really been involved in LGBT activism at all to be honest um and not because I wasn't interested, I was absolutely interested in LGBT rights etcetera but I think looking ahead, one of the greatest gift that our generation can have, that our generations can have in the future is that this isn't a political issue any more. Um I wanted to go back a bit to the discussion about transphobia and transsexuals if I may because actually I think transphobia is an incredible problem in the LGBT community in general. Um personally speaking it took me a long time to meet transsexuals and to sympathise more with their plight. I think that especially living in Turkey where the situation between er between lesbians and gays and transgender people is incredibly different, it's worlds apart in terms of how they are perceived by society and sort of difficulties they've face. I think that's, this is one of the last big issues we really have to tackle um and I think we still haven't upped our game on it to be honest I think there is a long way to go on that issue in particular.

17:58

Surat:

Is it a different discourse in the Jewish community if we're talking about gender issues or trans issues? Are u saying we are in a different place then the rest of the LGBT community? Is there...?

Jacob:

I've never really seen transgender issues addressed in the Jewish community. Or adequately. I ran a session on a summer camp with kids um where I was like teaching them these terms and um, terms transgender and cisgender and things, and these basic things like that. Er and it was really the first time any of them heard that stuff or, or just like cisgender kids never having even thought about that and that is what cisgender privilege is, not having to think about that. So incorporating that into a kind of Jewish education I think can only have positive influences in terms of our progressiveness as a people.

Surat:

Mmm.. As a newbie sort of to the British (something?), any comparison to where America, America's LGBT Jewish community is at, or queer community and where we are here? What is your impression, your feelings about that?

David Tim:

Um, I think in America there as so many more problems that we are tackling that have been dealt with here a while ago. Um my impression from them is that a lot of us still stand together much more heavily that we all in the same boat that we all have to overcome. So i've experience a lot less issues of any kind between ah gays lesbians and transgender people not necessarily understanding each other because it is all just an acceptance that we all have to work together regardless. Um, I haven't experienced much of it here but only because I've not heavily, met many transgender people here. Um speaking personally for myself, one of my best friends from my teenage, well we met before we were teenagers and all through my teenage years up until now, has been someone who identifies as gender queer, so personally its almost been a normal for me for so long that it never occurs to me to be an issue for anyone else. So.

Surat:

Notion of family, that's another interesting thing to think of. You, you, you had mentioned that a little bit in terms of you know, how its changed. Do you still feel it is important for young and youngish LGBT people? Would you, do you have kids? Would you like to have kids? You know and the whole marriage thing again and you know we were laughing about the, the, the Jewish mother thing during the break.

Alex:

I rang my Jewish mother during the break.

Surat:

There you go. So do you think the tradition in terms of, the Jewish tradition is, is, is pretty much the same taking into account all those ??? changes and how Britain is today?

20:46

Alex:

For me, yeah, I can only speak for myself, family is such an integral part of how I understand what it is to be Jewish and to create Jewish community and to be a Jewish person. That you, and that includes having children, um that you have grown up in a period of history where I never occurred to me that it was possible and that my partner is now in her mid thirties and she's just that other side of that generation where it was possible and there was representation. We were talking in the break how unusual your mother was, yeah?

Jacob:

Yeah.

Alex:

Um, I just, I think its amazing that you could grow up now as a Jewish gay person and thinking of yourself as creating a family. I think that phenomenal. And important.

Surat:

Mmmm, mmm.

Jacob:

Yeah and, yeah when my mum was raising a queer Jewish family in the 90s, that was just unheard of and the kind of hurdles that she had to overcome on a day to day basis even if, if it was something as simple as filling out a form was just relentless. Um so yeah no I definitely have lots of respect for her and I think people like her have paved the way for queer Jewish families to be able to even envisage having that kind of family. Do I want that myself? I'm not too sure right now and I'm young so I don't think I need to start thinking about it. But I'd like to know that there definitely the opportunity out there.

Surat:

Yeah. So if you, if you sort of imagine how would it have been for you if you have been brought up about thirty years back, as an LGBT Jew... You know, you talk about privilege... Do you think there is a privilege here in terms of lifestyles and opportunities and possibilities, or...?

David:

I feel lucky. I mean its difficult to know depending on the sort of family you had and their level of observance and their world view etcetera, presumably for most people it was much more difficult on a number of different levels. Um like I said earlier you

know I was, I was at school, I was coming out time when there was so many changes happening and you know channel four was broadcasting 'queer as folk' (?) and this sort of thing, you know it was amazing and I felt at the time very lucky um and that's why at the time I didn't really have any conflict about religion morality and being gay etcetera because it felt like it was becoming much more accepted, by the day almost. Um but for people who maybe couldn't see the changes forthcoming some decades ago, I can't imagine how difficult that must have been for some people. Um.

Surat:

What is your vision for the future?

Alex:

That's a big question.

Surat:

Yourself as an LGBT Jewish person in Britain?

23:47

David Tim:

Hopefully that my family that I eventually have with my partner and my kids will be something that's a fairly normal thing. Not necessarily that it's incredibly common, I mean the communities will always be a certain size but just that no one necessarily bats an eyelash about us being there, um its just another form family.

Surat:

And on that note I'd like to end this session by saying thank you for being her today and sharing your stories with us. And let's remember that each and every one of you are contributing to LGBT Jewish history in the UK.

