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Power and pride: 7 queer Jews to be reckoned with

From lesbian rabbis to maverick journalists and multi-millionaire sex app developers, a new crop of (sometimes controversial) LGBT Jewish leaders is making waves around the world.

By Judd Yadid | 15:55 10.06.14 |  0

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Activist Jewish icons like Magnus Hirschfeld and Harvey Milk are the stuff of legends. But now, a new generation of queer Jewish pioneers has taken the baton – each in his or her own way catalyzing social, political, spiritual and technological change.

In honor of Tel Aviv Pride 2014, here's a look at just a few:

Not your average Colorado dad – Jared Polis



Photo by Wikimedia

He's an American progressive's dream – a fracking-bashing, marijuana dispensary-visiting gay congressman from a key purple state. A self-made millionaire, Jared Polis, not yet 40, has made a name for himself as a champion of drug, immigration and education reform. Representing Colorado's 2nd congressional district, which includes the northwestern suburbs of Denver and the college town of Boulder, Polis has also become one of the nation's most forceful critics of the controversial hydraulic fracturing process. That's in addition to his passionate advocacy of gay marriage and his trendsetting status as Congress' first out gay father. Where to from here? Polis looks on track to be re-elected this November for a fourth term, with some touting him as a future Democratic Party leader.

Putting the gay in GPS – Joel Simkhai



Photo by Davide Laffe

Ask many gay men if they know of the orange- and black-colored app Grindr and you'll receive a knowing smile. The GPS-guided hook-up app has had a whopping 10 million user downloads in over 190 countries during its five years of existence. It's all thanks to Tel Aviv-born, New York-raised Joel Simkhai, Grindr's founder and CEO. And Grindr is not just about sexual libertinism nor raking in the money; it also serves as a multi-million user platform for LGBT activism. "Grindr for Equality," launched in 2012, attempts to harness horniness for a higher cause, delivering geo-targeted messages about candidates' policies during election season, as well as information on what's happening politically in the user's area.

Transforming narratives – Surat Shaan Rathgeber Knan



Photo by Ajamu

From a 1980s AIDS memorial quilt to the story of the United Kingdom's only known intersex Jew, a landmark archive and exhibition opened in London recently, marking the fruition of transgender activist Surat Shaan Rathgeber Knan's vision. Driven by the belief that LGBT Jews have been excluded from British Jewry's collective memory, the initiative, "Rainbow Jews," tells the diverse stories of this double-minority group through a trove of oral testimonies, photographs and other sources that stretch back to Nazi Europe. Through their activities, Knan and company shed light on an oft-ignored layer of the world's fifth-largest Jewish community – seeking to write LGBT Jews back into the history books. In another endeavor, Knan is about to launch a second, equally unprecedented heritage project, "Twilight People," which will explore the lives of British transgender people from across the Abrahamic religious spectrum.

Down with Biphobia! – Shiri Eisner



Photo by Lilach Ben David

Of all the identities expressed in the acronymic mouthful of LGBT, bisexuals are commonly seen as the confused fence-sitters of the group. Challenging such stereotypical perceptions is the Israeli author and researcher Shiri Eisner, in a case laid out in her recent book, “Bi: Notes for a Bisexual Revolution,” which earned her a 2014 “Lammy” nomination from the Lambda Literary Awards, considered the Grammy of American LGBT literature. Eisner offers up a radical critique of society’s binary understandings of sexuality, asserting that bisexuals are nothing short of oppressed – dominated by the dark forces of monosexuality. As a Sephardic Israeli, Eisner also draws parallels between the Mizrahi experience and that of bisexuals – both, in her analysis, subject to systematic erasure of culture and identity. Whether you ascribe to her revolutionary sentiment or not, Eisner’s is a novel voice in Israel’s ethnic, religious and sexual cacophony.

Spreading the word – Glenn Greenwald

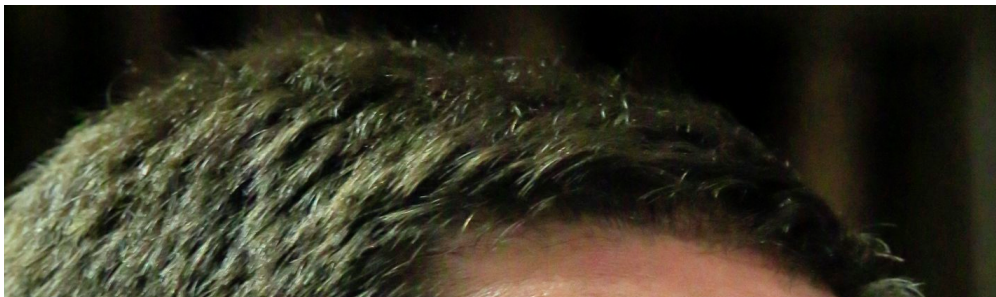




Photo by AP

Whether you think Edward Snowden is a traitor or an intrepid truth teller, there is little denying the far-reaching implications of his stunning leaks exposing the vast global surveillance network run by the U.S. National Security Administration. And it has been New York-born, lawyer-turned-journalist Glenn Greenwald who has catapulted Snowden's revelations into the public consciousness. While not silent on LGBT issues,

especially the unconstitutionality of the now-repealed Defense of Marriage Act (which prompted him to move to his boyfriend's native Brazil) and even suing a landlord during his college days for discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, it's Greenwald's relentless reporting on the NSA saga that has cemented his status as a figure of outsized consequence. His recently released book, "No Place to Hide," not only reveals more details about the Snowden affair and the scope of NSA spying, but also provides a biting critique of the American media's acquiescence in the era of the "War on Terror," as well as ideas of how to protect privacy and democracy in the digital age. To Greenwald, it seems, the rights of the individual are sacrosanct, no matter what your sexuality, nationality or religion.

Made in Gay Semitic Heaven – Omar Sharif Jr.



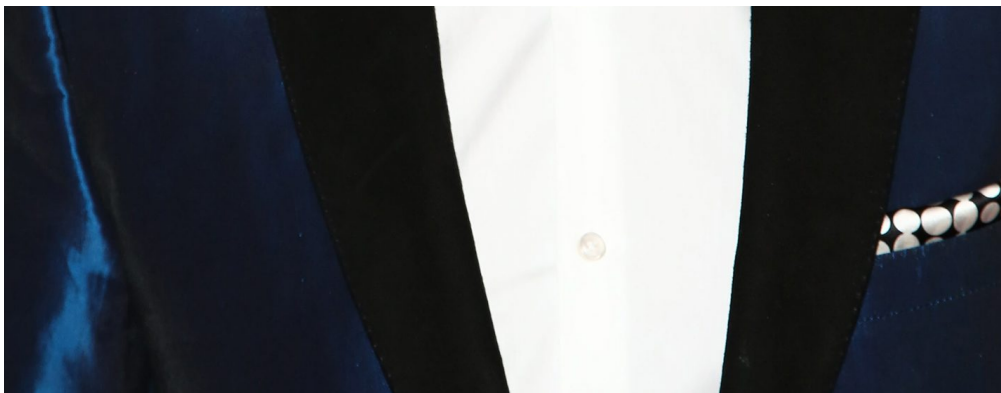


Photo by Brian Dowling/Retna Ltd

It made for the most fabulous of headlines when Egyptian native Omar Sharif Jr. – grandson of the iconic screen legend – came out as both gay and half-Jewish in an open letter published in The Advocate in 2012. The model, actor, LSE alumnus and now LGBT rights activist called for post-Mubarak Egypt to respect the rights of all of the country's heterogeneous people, including its sexual minorities, as it seemingly advanced toward democracy. Now a resident of Los Angeles, where he is pursuing his acting career, Sharif Jr. serves as the co-national spokesperson of the Gay Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) – proving himself to be not just a pretty face, but a unique cross-cultural voice for equality.

Judaism for us, Judaism by us – Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum



Photo by AP

In the progressive promised land of Manhattan, a left-wing lesbian rabbi leads her 800-strong (4000 over Yom Kippur!) flock at the Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, described as the largest LGBT synagogue in the world. Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, a mother of two who has served as the congregation's spiritual leader for two decades, has built a reputation as a pivotal player in LGBT Judaism's coming of age, and as a tireless advocate for civil and human rights. Since New York State legalized gay marriage in 2011, Kleinbaum has officiated at a steady stream of same-sex Jewish weddings, even staging a "pop-up chuppah" outside the city's municipal building on the day legalization came into effect. The synagogue, which has a female Israeli cantor, Reu't Ben-Ze'ev, has also forged strong partnerships with Israeli organizations, such as the Jerusalem Open House, and ordained LGBT Israelis rabbis who have returned to Israel to practice. Will a sister synagogue follow one day in Jerusalem, or perhaps more aptly in Tel Aviv?

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