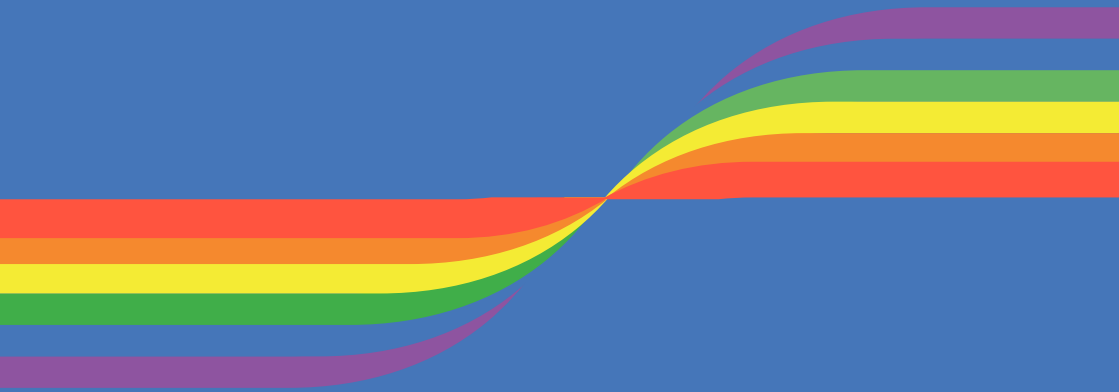


RAINBOW JEWS



Celebrating LGBT Jewish History and Heritage in the UK

Rainbow Jews

In the course of a single lifetime, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) Jewish identity has been transformed, from something not even named to something celebrated.

Fifty years ago, being Jewish and LGBT meant that you were invisible and unwanted. Over time, wider social changes as well as shifts in the thinking of progressive Jewish communities have enabled people to embrace their Jewish LGBT identity.

Rainbow Jews is a ground-breaking oral history project that documents this journey. The stories of love and loss, struggles and victories, form the core of the oral history archive. Among them are the pioneers: the first rabbis to come out and speak on behalf of the Jewish LGBT community; the men, women and transgender Jews who struggled against prejudice and rejection; and the founders of the first LGBT-friendly synagogue.

Yet there are also many whose voices we cannot hear today: those LGBT Jews who never lived to see a world in which their diverse identities are accepted and embraced. This exhibition is also dedicated to them.

Rainbow Jews is supported by the National Lottery through the Lottery Heritage Fund, and hosted by Liberal Judaism.

Jewish and Gay: Conflict or Comfort?

“ I was 19 at the time. I met a friend of my sister’s who was a lesbian. I think she fancied me. She bought me a silver cigarette case and I thought: this is strange... I never cottoned on. I liked her but at the time I didn’t know. The feeling in those days was that things such as lesbians and gays don’t exist. They’re a breed apart. ”



To Reni, in 1940s Palestine, meeting an openly lesbian woman awakened feelings she found hard to put into words.

Being Jewish and LGBT makes you doubly “different”. LGBT Jews often have to come to terms with the social and religious effects of living with both an LGBT and a Jewish identity. For many, the fight for acceptance among family and friends begins with a battle for accepting yourself.

Orthodox and Transgender: Struggling to Conform

Bella transitioned from male to female in 2010, but growing up near London in the 1960s and 1970s, she fought against her gender.

“From the age of four or five [I remember] knowing [I] was actually presenting to society in the wrong gender. I felt female but had to live as a male. And so, I had to over-compensate and demonstrate even more that I was male and hide away my female self.”

Gay and “Semi-Religious”: Learning to Embrace Difference

Despite growing up in Glasgow in the 1960s, David Rubin found his sexuality easy to accept.

“I never struggled against it, never ever... I didn’t ever feel abnormal, I didn’t ever feel I was doing something wrong. I knew I was different, but I accepted that. But then I was different being Jewish, I was different being vegetarian, and so I was always different.”

The Love that Dare not Speak its Name

Prohibited by British as well as biblical law, the situation of gay Jewish men seemed impossible before homosexuality was decriminalised in 1967. At the same time, the refusal to acknowledge the existence of lesbianism meant that many Jewish lesbian and bisexual women felt estranged from their religious community and British society as a whole.

“ It was a forbidden subject, you didn't dare. You have to remember, it was a criminal offence in England, unless you lived in a certain type of society – café society – where things like Noel Coward existed. But if you lived in middle-class suburbia, it was impossible. ”

Rabbi Lionel Blue

“ The label 'lesbian' was just not possible. I was Jewish and born in 1960, fifteen years after the Holocaust, after the Second World War had ended, so it just really wasn't within my vocabulary. ”

Tess Joseph

Alone No More

LGBT Jews wanted to be out and proud, but in order to find the confidence to express their LGBT-Jewish identity, they needed the support of others. On 13 October 1970, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was established at the London School of Economics. The movement campaigned for radical changes in society that would lead to wider acceptance of lesbian and gay people.



“ It wasn't really until I discovered the Jewish Gay Group that it actually became much easier for me to accept that you could still lead a Jewish life, but be gay at the same time – because other people were doing it. ”

Gordon Woolfe

Simon Benson, quoted in Come Together, the magazine of the GLF, in 1971, describes the feeling of no longer being alone. "As gay Jewish people we feel at long last that we have convinced the Jewish community that we do exist in large numbers. History will record that we are the first Jewish homosexual group in Europe."

We Are Family

As the 1970s progressed, many LGBT Jews were more confident in being out and proud. Groups such as the Jewish Gay Group (JGG) provided much needed opportunities to meet like-minded individuals. Meetings at Soho drinking spots and weekend socials created an alternative, close-knit support network that felt, for many, like a family.

“ There was a tiny, tiny network of people that had coffee evenings and socials... Yeah, it was nice to make the connection with my Jewishness and my gayness because I didn't think that was possible. ”

Russell Vandyk



“ The very first meeting I ever came to was the men's pub evening at the King's Arms. I met someone and fell in love. That was pretty dramatic. ”

Rabbi Mark Solomon on a visit to the King's Arms in Soho, which has always been London's "pink mile".

Pride and Prejudice

A new, shared sense of solidarity and purpose meant that LGBT Jews were an increasingly visible presence in the 1980s and 1990s. Pride marches were an opportunity to get together and make a strong statement. Yet this new outspokenness took place against a new political backdrop that was increasingly hostile towards the LGBT community.

On 24 May 1988, a law was passed stating that local authorities "shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality". It was a blow to LGBT communities everywhere.

However, this was also the beginning of changing attitudes to homosexuality in Jewish communities, as Jews started to stand up against the anti-homosexual legislation.



“ Pride marches were really getting established in the 80s, so we thought why not have the Jewish Gay Group 'Bagel and cream cheese' stall? We would always sell out. We had hundreds of these bagels, and some people actually joined the group on the strength of that. We had a banner and we would march... it felt like a coming out. It was very special. ”

Russell Vandyk recalls early efforts made by the Jewish Gay Group to reach out beyond the Jewish Community:

Return to Values: Responding to the AIDS Crisis

The AIDS outbreak of the late 1980s threatened to engulf gay communities throughout the Western world, and many felt more estranged than ever from their heterosexual friends and family. .

Liberal Judaism convert Nick Jackson speaks of this period as one of mutual misunderstanding:

“In the 90s when a lot of people were dying of AIDS, there used to be these horrendous scenarios whereby the parents would blame the gay friends and the gay friends would blame the homophobic parents and at the funeral... each side was looking daggers at each other.”

For gay Jewish men, the ongoing struggle for acceptance by mainstream Jewish denominations meant that many were forced to seek support from communities they had formed themselves.

“There’s a tradition in Jewish life of looking after your own, of charity and looking after the elderly and that sort of thing. And therefore gay people had to learn that. And I think they only learnt it through the AIDS business, as they were faced with a problem which was more or less theirs.”

Rabbi Lionel Blue

Lives of Duplicity

Although progressive Judaism in the UK has long welcomed LGBT people into its communities, more traditional strands have struggled with the acceptance of those who lead alternative lifestyles.

Zizi describes life in London’s United Synagogue life at the turn of the 21st century.

“At the time I came out [the synagogue] would not have been particularly supportive.”

Abi Jay is the only known Jewish intersex person in the UK, and grew up in an Orthodox environment. After her gender reassignment, she continued to attend a conservative synagogue. She says: “I have got so close to my mother with all this; the Rabbi of our Orthodox congregation gave his blessing so I could sit next to my mother in shul. That’s a nice feeling.”

In 2010, Esther, a mother of five, found support with the JGLG after leaving the ultra-Orthodox community for a more secular life.

“I always tell people I grew up in London, but I didn’t really grow up in London: I grew up in Stamford Hill as part of the Hassidic, the Ultra-Orthodox community. It was like living in a bubble. I knew if I wanted to live... as a lesbian I couldn’t do it in that community.”

Under the Chuppah

Fighting for the Right to Marry

In 1998, the Working Party of the Rabbi's Assembly published a report to help Reform rabbis in deciding whether to conduct lesbian and gay commitment ceremonies. Yet, according to Rabbi Mark Solomon, who was a main player in the marriage debate, gay marriage "had become a very contentious issue and brought out a huge amount of latent homophobia that I don't think anybody realised was still there."

“ I don't want to have what people used to perceive as a 'gay lifestyle'. What I aspire is to be in a stable monogamous relationship, having children... And that's important to me partly because of Judaism – the structures and rituals that made up my childhood. ”

Benjamin Cohen

It was not until 2000, when the Liberal Jewish movement decided to draft a religious ceremony for same-sex commitment ceremonies, that the situation began to change. The text of this ceremony was published in December 2005, and was called "Berit Ahava" (the Covenant of Love). The ceremony modifies a traditional Jewish wedding service for same-sex couples.

Yet, many Jewish LGBT couples are eager for the Marriage Act to be made law in 2014. Peggy Sherwood and her partner Alison Rees had their Jewish "Covenant of Love" ceremony in 2007 but say that they definitely will get married as well, because, as Peggy says: "When I finally accepted that I was a lesbian, I never thought I'd stand under a Chuppah."

"The Wheel Could Turn"

Early Jewish LGBT activists struggled for recognition against a backdrop of institutionalised homophobia and widespread misunderstanding. Today, many are able to view their identities as a cause for celebration. Yet, for the pioneers of LGBT Jewish activism, any celebration of present success must be balanced by understanding the past – the struggles that have shaped the journeys of LGBT Jews.



“ I see a lot of young Jewish gay people today who are very confident about being out. I see them on Old Compton Street wearing their Star of David like it was just a piece of jewellery. They think it's fun... but they have to be aware that things weren't always so easy. The danger is that people get too relaxed and comfortable. Actually, it's a serious matter and one needs to be on guard, because at any time the wheel could turn. ”

Russell Vandyk

Who are the Gay Rabbis?



Rabbi Lionel Blue, born in 1930, was the first British rabbi publicly to declare his homosexuality. He remembers how he decided to do so.

“A newspaper was on my trail, so I thought the first thing to do was get my story in first. I made a disclosure of [my sexuality] to a big newspaper in Britain, and I argued my case – why I was what I was and why I did what I did.”

“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 Rabbi Lionel Blue was the only other gay rabbi.”



Rabbi Mark Solomon was inspired by Lionel Blue. With his help, Mark began to come to terms with his identity.

When Elli met Sheila

Sheila Shulman and Elizabeth “Elli” Tikvah Sarah met in 1982, and started to train at Leo Baeck College, East Finchley, in 1984. They were the first

openly lesbian rabbinical students. After being ordained in 1989, Sheila went on to found the first lesbian-feminist congregation in the UK.

“The founding group was [made up of] seven women; I had in mind a community that is predominantly gay and lesbian. It was carefully diverse: if straight people were joining, it was on the understanding that they were allies.”

Sheila Shulman



“We were putting together what it meant for us to be a lesbian, to be a Jew. We could see strong similarities, because in both cases [we had] minority marginal identities.”

Elli Tikvah Sarah

“A breed apart no more”

“ I feel very comfortable with being Jewish, being a lesbian, being a feminist, being a radical activist, being a campaigner, being a very stropdy dyke, and just hanging out with my mates and having a good time. ”

Tess Joseph

“ The merging of my Jewish and my lesbian self was something that I had never believed would happen. And it has happened. ”

Peggy Sherwood

“ My story is about commitment to both sides of me. To be Jewish and bisexual is something that happens inside of me and without any choice. It can give me some problems, and it can give me a lot of satisfaction. I can choose to hide it, or celebrate it. ”

Ed Teeger

“ A lot of my gay male friends are totally secular. When I started going back to shul [synagogue] they thought they were going to see me with ringlets and a fur hat; they didn't really understand that I needed ritual. My gayness is pretty essential to me of course but my spirituality is essential, too. ”

Searle Kochberg

“ It was like saying: I am here, we survived despite everything that you did to both gay and Jewish people. You wanted to destroy us, and here I am. You are destroyed and I am walking out with the person who makes me happiest in this world. That was symbolically so important to me. ”

Zizi recalling a trip to the Krakow Holocaust camps with her partner

Rainbow Jews would like to thank and acknowledge the following for their contributions to and help with the exhibition:

Charlotte Kingston: Curator and exhibition coordinator

Urjuan Toosy: Exhibition Designer

Lara Atkin: Writer

Surat Knan: Writer

James Lesh: Academic Researcher

Exhibition Volunteers: Lara Atkin, Anna Brooke Barker, Blanka Horakova, Dr Simon Mayers, Greg Reisman, Lisa Rodan, Rachel Schon, Shiraaz Sidat, Raphael Smith, Alison Turner and David Walsh

Exhibition booklet created by Charlotte Kingston and Kate Brangan

A big thank you to following individuals, groups, and organisations for their support and contribution:

Liberal Judaism, The London Metropolitan Archives, The Hall Carpenter Archives, LSE, The University of Portsmouth, Rotunda Studios, The Jewish and Gay Lesbian Group, The Jewish Museum London, Centred, Jenny Cousins Verusca Calabria

Thank you to the following for granting permission to use images:

Jewish Chronicle, Jewish Telegraph Group of Newspapers, Finchley Times, Sunday Times, Time Out, Shaun Levin, Keshet UK, Russell Vandyk, Mike Cooke, Gary Itaaliander, Peter Daniels, Matthew Andrews, Beit Klal Yisrael, Board of Deputies

Thank you to the following for loaning memorabilia and objects:

Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah, Rabbi Mark Solomon, David Jacobs, Belinda Milrod

This exhibition is in association with LSE Arts and LSE Spectrum. Rainbow Jews is supported by the National Lottery Heritage through the Heritage Lottery Fund, and hosted by Liberal Judaism. We thank all our project associates for their kind support.

Surat Rathgeber Knan,
Rainbow Jews Project Manager

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“I hope that our stories encourage people in Britain to celebrate being Jewish and LGBT – both, as well as each.”

Karen Newman and Susan Crane

“ There is a story which
should not be lost. ”

Reni, 90

For those at the intersection between Jewish and LGBT identities, life can be doubly complex. Yet over the course of a single lifetime, LGBT Jewish identity has transformed, from something not even named to something celebrated. Here you will find a truly diverse range of Jewish voices including Ultra-Orthodox lesbians, bisexual rabbis, gay Holocaust survivors and transgender activists.

This exhibition at the London School of Economics in London marks the launch of the Rainbow Jews exhibition during LGBT History Month in February 2014. Rainbow Jews is a ground-breaking oral history and archive project documenting the stories and experiences of LGBT Jewish people in Britain from the 1950s to today.

rainbow jews



LOTTERY FUNDED