

NOW & THEN Transcript: Part 2

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:

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:

My name is Alex. I'm forty-three, 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. 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 games development.

Surat:

Thank you. So, 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 *shul* in

Leicester, Leicester Progressive and I am currently looking for a *shul* in London. 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 group for Jews living in London. 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:

They have been very separate. I haven't really been member of groups that have crossed over until recently in London, so now I am a member of the Lesbian and Gay Jewish Group in London. 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:

Similar to the other two, my Jewish life and LGBT life have been quite separate until now. 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 err 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:

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 LGBT 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:

Alright. 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 it's 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 it's a really great place to be Jewish and LGBT, in my experience so far.

Surat:

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.

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:

For me, it was kind of 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:

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 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:

Any more voices on that?

David:

I think for me the whole same sex marriage um debate and its subsequent legislation 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, equalisation, getting rid of Section 28 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, 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. 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 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 marriages in places of worship, like a synagogue for example? Does that make a difference for you?

13:42

Jacob:

Yeah, definitely. I knew synagogues 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:

I'm really really happy about it actually, because it 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, 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 gender, gender identities and the discourse. Would you like to expand on that?

Jacob:

Yeah. I think, the LGBT community has quite a bad history in the way that it has treated transgender people and I think that it's 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 a 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 addressed and that not seeing it as so but they're not like us they're trouble, their 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 '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 an 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 28. I was at school in Section 28 and Tony Blair is part of my adult life not my kind of coming out life 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 a 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 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. 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. 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 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 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 you 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 where I was like teaching them these terms and, terms like 'transgender and cisgender' and things, and these basic things like that. And it was really the first time any of them heard that stuff, 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:

As a newbie sort of to the Britain, 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:

I think in America there as so many more problems that we are tackling that have been dealt with here a while ago. 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 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. I haven't experienced much of it here but only because I've not heavily, met many transgender people here. Speaking personally for myself, one of my best friends from my teenage years, well we met before we were teenagers and all through my teenage years up until now, has been someone who identifies as genderqueer, so personally it's almost been a normal for me for so long that it never occurs to me to be an issue for anyone else.

Surat:

Notion of family, that's another interesting thing to think of. You had mentioned that a little bit in terms of you know... how it's changed. Do you still feel it is important for young and young-ish LGBT people? Would you, or 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 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 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:

I just think it's 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:

/Agrees/

Jacob:

Yeah and, 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. So yeah, 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 for 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 is definitely the opportunity out there.

Surat:

Yeah. So, if you sort of imagine how would it have been for you if you had 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 it's 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, 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 4 was broadcasting 'Queer as Folk' and this sort of thing, you know it was amazing and I felt at the time very lucky 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. 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.

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 will 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, it's just another form family.

Surat:

And on that note I'd like to end this session by saying thank you for being here 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.