

Who are the Gay Rabbis?

Lionel Blue, born 6 February 1930, was the first British rabbi publicly to declare his homosexuality. He remembers how he decided to do so:

“ There was a complete change... What had started in 1950 was now coming out in England. And the newspaper was on my trail, and somebody told me this was happening, they were going to get me, so I thought the first thing to do was get my story in first. So I made a disclosure of it to a big newspaper in Britain, and I argued my case – why I was what I was and why I did what I did. ”

Born in the East End of London, Lionel had grown up without any notion that same sex love was possible for him as a Jew.



Rabbi Lionel Blue (Portrait by Gary Italiaander, www.italiaander.co.uk).

Rabbi Lionel Blue is famous for his wisdom and warmth, and he has inspired many of Britain's LGBT Jews. Among them was Mark Solomon, who, with Lionel's help, began coming to terms with his identity:

“ I had been working towards being an Orthodox rabbi, and this [my homosexuality] was not going to fit in with that at all. There were very few people I could talk to about it, but when I contacted Rabbi Lionel Blue, he began helping me to put my life back together. I felt he was someone that I could really talk to, who... knew the Jewish side and the gay side. ”

In 1992, Rabbi Mark Solomon made a public statement about his sexual orientation and subsequently left the United Synagogue to become a progressive rabbi:

“ It was still kind of news-worthy back in those days, I was certainly the first Orthodox rabbi who came out in this country, and Lionel Blue was the only other gay rabbi. ”

Views on homosexuality have changed since the two rabbis came out, as Lionel Blue says in his Rainbow Jews interview in 2013:

“ There have been two revolutions in life in the 20th century. One has been the change of women's status. And the other one is the emancipation of the sexual minorities; both of them have changed the dialogue very much indeed. I don't think people today mind if the rabbi is gay, lesbian or what, provided that the person is kind, decent and learned. What else do I think? LGBT people can give the Jewish world humour, which it needs very badly. ”

*A Yiddish is an expression for a gay person, often derogative.

When Elli met Sheila

Sheila Shulman and Elizabeth “Elli” Tikvah Sarah 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, Beit Klal Yisrael (BKY).

Sheila elaborates on BKY’s history and ethos:

“As it happened, 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 would have to be on the assumption that they understood that if we were marginalised they were also marginalised - they were allies.”

Elli met Sheila in 1982 at a Jewish lesbian Group. She described her experience as “powerful”.

“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 people would not necessarily know [that] we were – [lesbian and Jewish] – [we had] minority marginal identities.”

Elli realised how powerful her Jewish identity was. In 1983, she decided to become a rabbi “to solve her existential dilemma”:

“My rabbinate is dedicated to inclusion in every respect. I have been doing all I can to enable and facilitate other people – Jewish LGBT people and anybody who doesn’t feel mainstream – who feel on the margins and excluded.”



Breaking news: two lesbian rabbis ordained in the same year. Jewish Chronicle, 14 June 1989.



Rabbi Sheila Shulman was overjoyed about the success of BKY’s launch event and inspired to create an inclusive and diverse community. Jewish Chronicle, 4 June 1990.



Rabbi Sheila Shulman. Photograph credit: Peter Daniels.



Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah. Copyright Matthew Andrews, 2011.