

Jewish and Gay: Conflict or Comfort?

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

“ 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. ”

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

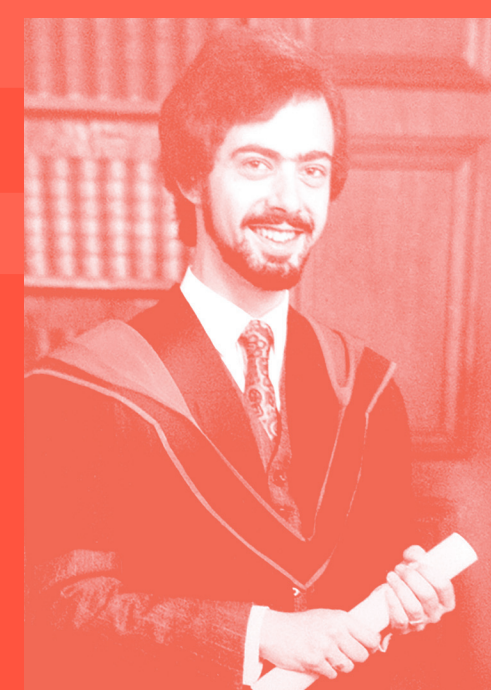


Gay and “semi-religious”

LEARNING TO EMBRACE DIFFERENCE

“ 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. ”

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



A secular Jewish lesbian

REALISING THAT YOU’RE A “BREED APART”

“ 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.



Bisexual and liberal

SEEKING TO ERASE DIFFERENCE

“ It’s not that I don’t speak out, it’s just not the main thing... It’s not a strong part of my public figure. I almost feel like it shouldn’t be, and we’ll have won the fight when it isn’t – when each person is a person. ”

Today, Rabbi Anna Gerrard feels that her sexuality should not make her different.

The Love that Dare not Speak its Name

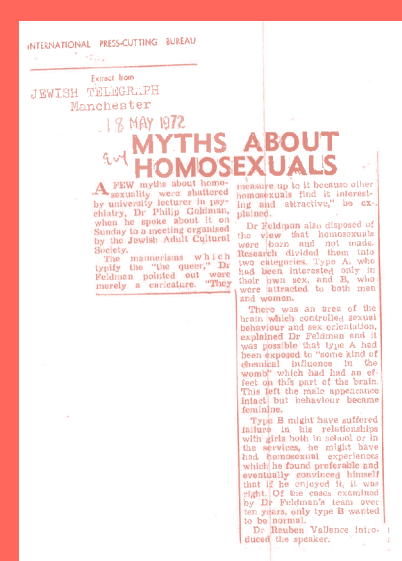
Prohibited by British as well as biblical law, the situation of gay Jewish men seemed impossible before homosexuality was decriminalised in 1967. At the same time, the refusal to acknowledge the existence of lesbianism meant that many Jewish lesbian and bisexual women felt estranged from their religious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



Jewish Telegraph Manchester, 18 May 1972.



Jewish Telegraph Manchester, 26 May 1972.



Jewish Telegraph Manchester, 4 February 1972.

Although it was rarely discussed, many felt that LGBT and Jewish identities were irreconcilable. The Jewish Bible, the Torah, states that: “If a man lie with mankind, as with womankind, both of them have committed an abomination”. [Leviticus 20:13]. At that time, voices in the mainstream Jewish press reflected this conservative stance.

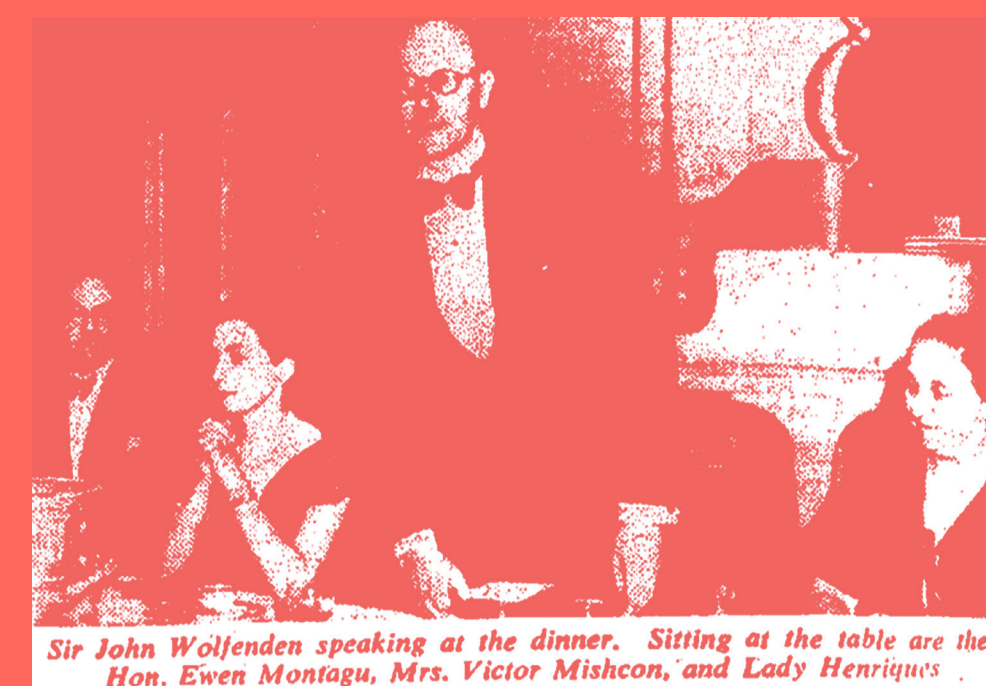
The publication of the Wolfenden Report in 1957 was a watershed moment in LGBT history. It had a profound impact on LGBT Jews, paving the way out of the “Jewish closet” and beginning a conversation among Jews about the possibility of accommodating LGBT identities within the faith.

“ [The report] came as a huge relief because when you’re a teenager you don’t really think that you’re doing something illegal. When they started discussing the Wolfenden Report, I actually realised that I was committing a crime having sex with someone of the same sex. In the 1960s, homosexuality was still illegal, so one had to be very, very careful. In those days, I just knew it was something that I enjoyed, but that it was wrong or bad to be homosexual. ”

– Gordon Woolfe

DID YOU KNOW THAT...?

- The Wolfenden Report recommended that homosexuality should no longer be a crime, making private homosexual acts between men legal. However, this was not made law until the Sexual Offences Act in 1967.
- The Wolfenden Committee, which sat between 1954 and 1957, had two Jewish members: Lord Mishcon and Mary Cohen.
- The Committee aimed to regulate homosexuality alongside prostitution by making them more visible – to both the law and the public.



Wolfenden Committee meeting with Lord Mishcon and Mary Cohen. Jewish Chronicle, 28 March 1958.

Alone No More: Early Activism

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.

The "Jewish Research Group", an offshoot of GLF, held their first public symposium in London titled "The Jewish Homosexual in Society" in 1971. With over 60 people attending, LGBT Jews were finding their voices for the first time:

“ 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. ”

– Simon Benson as quoted in Come Together, the magazine of the GLF, 1971-12, No. 12.

More, albeit short-lived initiatives, started to emerge, and in 1972, the carefully-worded Jewish Homophile Liaison Group (JHLLG) began organising a series of Teach-Ins.

Out of such initiatives came in 1972 the Jewish Gay Group (JGG). For many, the JGG offered what they desperately wanted – a social network in which they could express themselves and show that they were not alone. For many, the JGG played an essential role in helping them to shape an identity that incorporated both their religion and their sexuality.

“ 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 (aged 65)

“ I feel strongly Jewish and strongly gay and being with a group that represents this, sort of consolidates it. ”

– Sacha Kester (aged 77)

“ 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 (aged 59)



'Coffee Meeting', Gay News, No. 74, July 1975.



'Men havin coffee', Spode Retreat, 1983.



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.

The meetings at The King's Arms in Soho, which has always been London's "pink mile", and weekend socials created an alternative, close-knit support network that felt like a family for many.

“ 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. ”

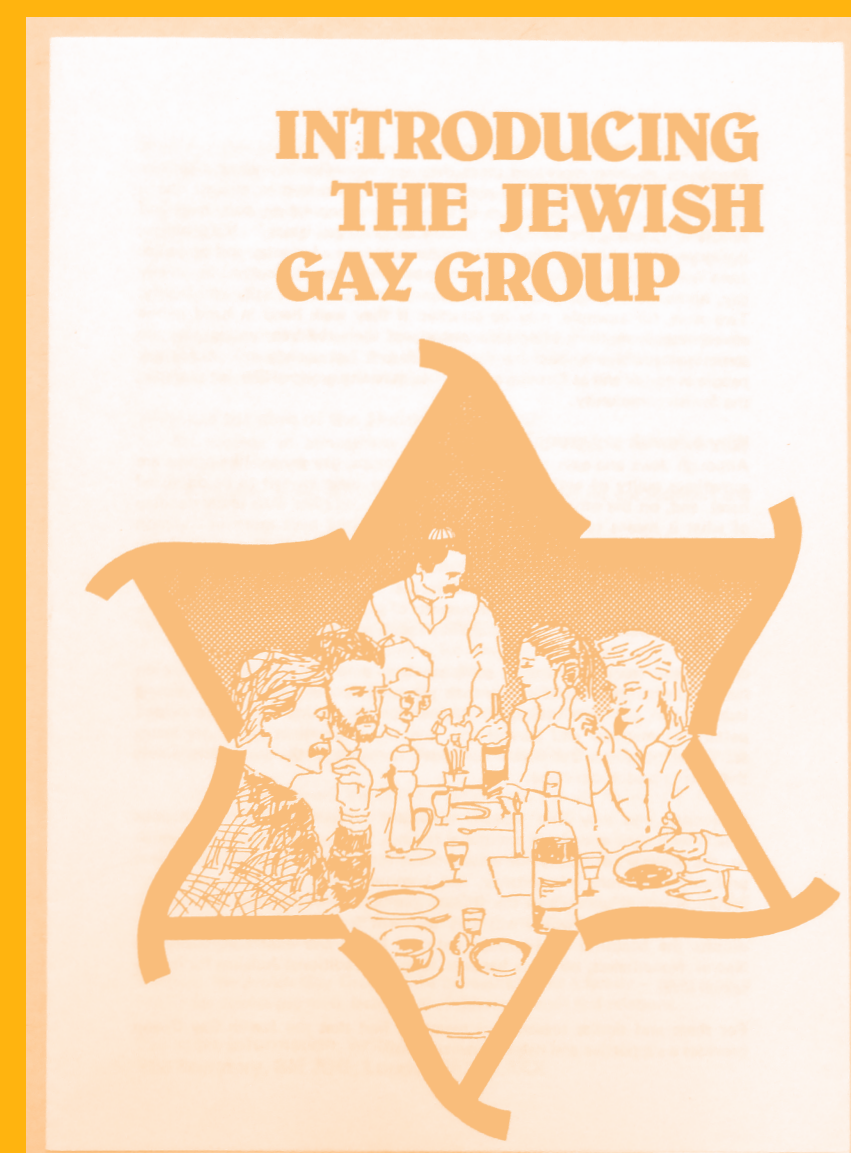
– Rabbi Mark Solomon

However, not everyone felt included. Ed Teeger, a bisexual man, describes how being in a straight marriage prevented him from expressing his gay identity. He remembers how he felt when he saw adverts for the Jewish Gay Group in Time Out, thinking:

“ Now that's the group I should belong to, but it's the one group I can't go near. ”

The JGG was at first primarily a men's group. But in 1987, the group changed its name to The Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group (JGLG) so that both men and women could feel part of the "family". Peggy Sherwood, today's JGLG President, remembers this time:

“ At the first JGLG event I went to, I was the only woman. So I organised a women's JGLG event at the Angel Pub in Islington. ”



JGG ephemera, 1980s.
With kind permission of HCA and JGLG.



JGLG Seder, 1980s.

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.

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

“ 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.

”



JGG Bagel Fundraiser.



Mike Lee recalls a fundraising event at the Lesbian and Gay Pride event in the early 1990s.

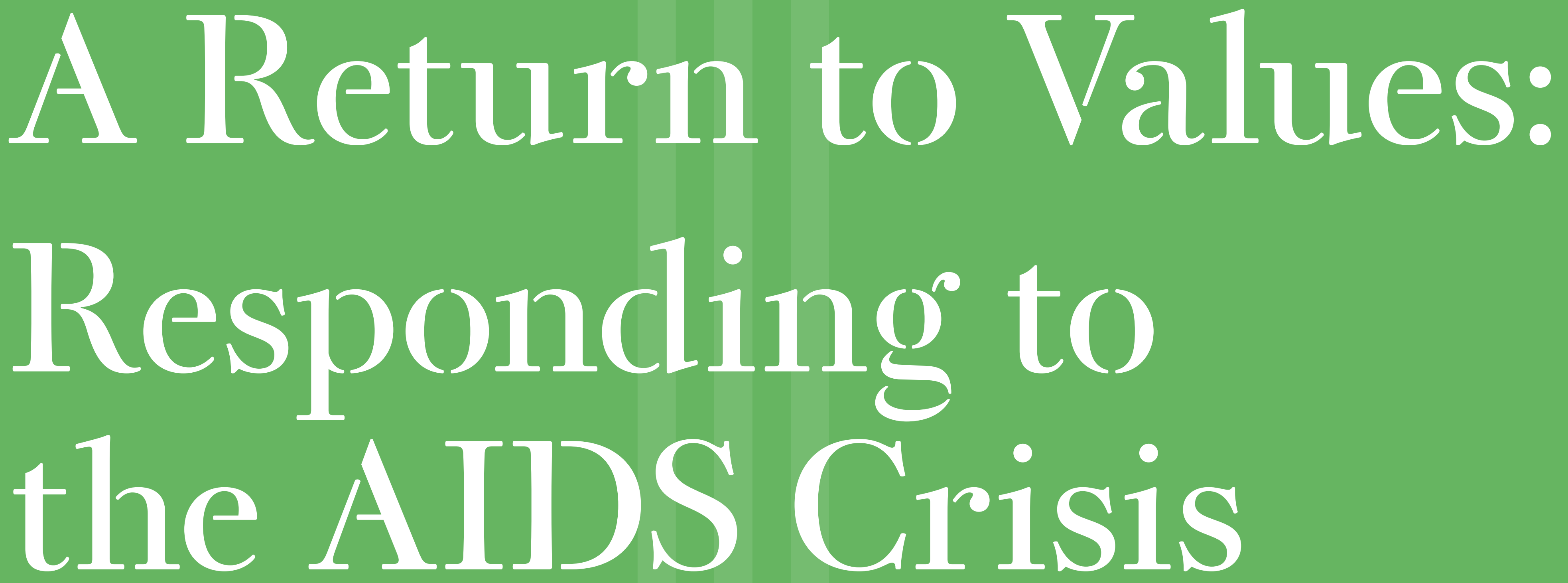
Yet this new outspokenness took place against a political backdrop, under Margaret Thatcher, that was increasingly hostile towards the LGBT community.

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”. This law was known as Section 28. Section 28 was a blow to LGBT communities everywhere. For many, it felt like a return to conservative, pre-1968 social attitudes.

Many in the progressive Jewish community condemned Section 28, including Rabbi James Baaden, who describes a statement which was signed “by 50 well-known Jewish figures here in the UK.” Yet the fact that Jews were standing up to anti-LGBT legislation meant that things were changing among Jewish communities. Instead of condemning non-heterosexual relationships, Jews were starting to recognise and accept them. LGBT individuals were now an intrinsic part of the Jewish community.

The struggle for acceptance within the mainstream Jewish community continued however. In July 1992, Walkabout, the largest Jewish community event ever, took place in London’s Hyde Park and the Jewish Lesbian and Gay Helpline was banned from taking part. Seemingly undaunted, JGLH responded by organising a fundraising campaign of their own.

“ The main purpose of the stall was to meet people, raise the profile of the helpline and publicise the group. As far as I can remember, it was a sunny day and a fun event. ”



LOTTERY FUNDED

liberal judaism

rainbow jews

Unpicking Patterns of Prejudice

“Today I’m a Jewish lesbian and proud of it.”– Malwa Rose, 2013



A Room of their own: Rabbi Sheila Shulman, Rabbi Elli Tikvah, and Linda Bellos at the Jewish Lesbian Conference, 23 May 1983.

The Women’s Liberation movement in the 1970s challenged the way society saw gender by uniting in the fight for equality. While many Jews joined radical feminist groups, some felt that being Jewish and feminist was difficult.

“ The whole sisterhood thing was fine as long as you were a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant – as long as you weren’t different, then you could be part of something which was the sisterhood of similarity. But when you had a difference, it didn’t quite fit – and fundamental to my identity was to be a Jew. ”

– Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah

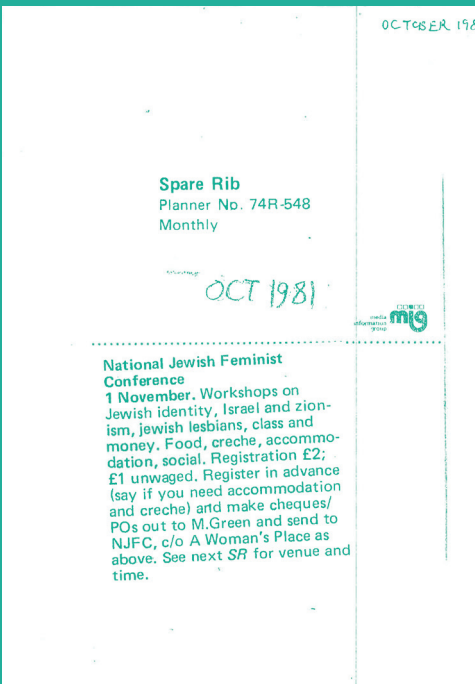
Women who identified as feminist, Jewish and lesbian felt that they were even more excluded from the mainstream Women’s Liberation movement. In 1974, the UK’s first Jewish, lesbian feminist group was started.

“ We met a couple of times but there was a furious backlash from non-Jewish partners and other English women. There was anti-Semitism in the Women’s Liberation Movement. ”

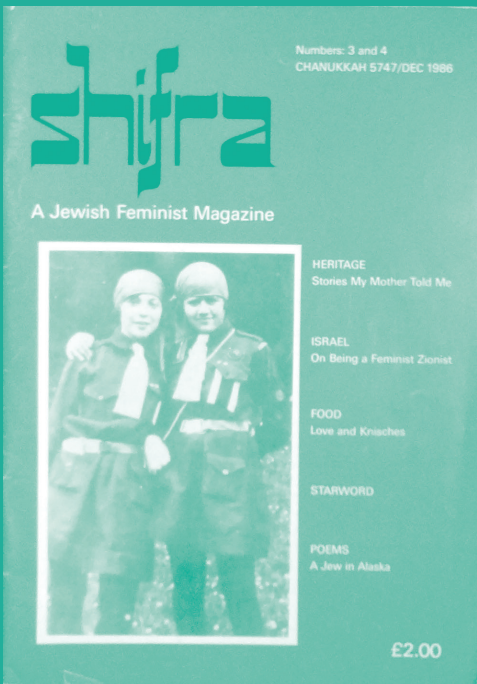
Linda Bellos, a feminist activist of mixed Jewish-Nigerian heritage, describes the difficulties lesbian Jews faced in the Women’s Liberation movement, particularly after Israel’s controversial invasion of Lebanon in 1982:

“ I was working at Spare Rib. I was the first Black woman to be in the collective and in part I left because of anti-Jewish stuff. They were mouthing sentiments and ideas which have been uttered for centuries and a number of us felt it. ”

Jewish lesbians began to feel they needed greater representation. In 1983, the first ever Jewish Lesbian Conference took place in Golders Green, and sparked off a wave of similar events throughout the mid-1980s. By the 1990s, the Jewish Feminist Movement had blossomed, providing spaces for lesbian Jews from all backgrounds to engage with one another – politically, spiritually and most importantly, socially.



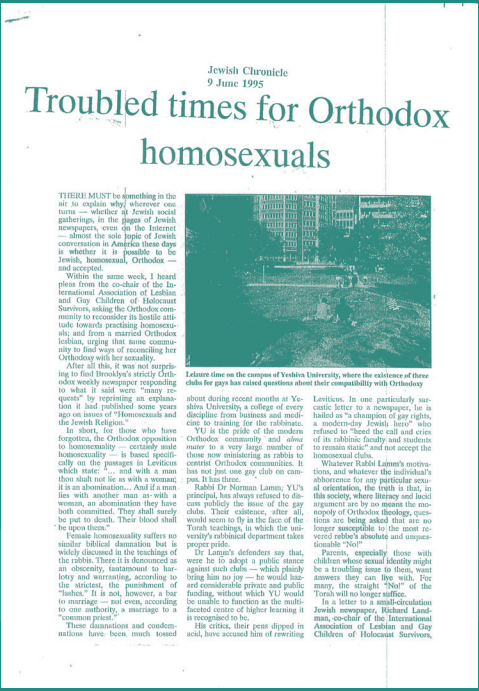
Spare Rib was one of the most prominent radical feminist collectives.



Shifra, 1986.

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.



Jewish Chronicle, 9 June 1995.



The Sunday Times, 21 November 1982.



Esther, who grew up in Stamford Hill before coming out.



Esther after coming out.

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

“ At the time I came out they would not have been particularly supportive; I remember a sermon was being given by a rabbi who said ‘If your children were gay then it was the parents’ fault for not bringing them up properly. ”

Rabbi Mark Solomon recalls his involvement with the Lubavitch movement, an ultra-Orthodox community:

“ People had arranged marriages. So I always thought, well, they’ll find me a wife and everything will be fine; all of these unpleasant thoughts will go away. ”

In 2010, Esther, a mother of five, found support with the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group 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 that life as a lesbian I couldn’t do it in that community. I would never be accepted. ”

Abi Jay is the only known Jewish intersex person in the UK, and grew up in an Orthodox environment. Unlike Esther, she had a positive experience with her traditional upbringing. After her gender reassignment, she continued to attend a conservative synagogue where men and women are separated by a mechitza, a partition.

“ I have got so close to my mother with all this; the Rabbi of our Orthodox congregation even gave his blessing so I could sit next to my mother in shul, at the synagogue. That’s a nice feeling. ”

Peggy Sherwood observes how religious attitudes have changed over time in the progressive strands of Judaism, and shares her vision of the future:

“ The heads of Reform and Liberal Judaism came to the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group’s 40th anniversary in 2012 and I thought ‘How far has the Jewish LGBT world come?’ But the day when the Chief Rabbi comes to a JGLG event, then we’ll know we’ve really arrived. ”

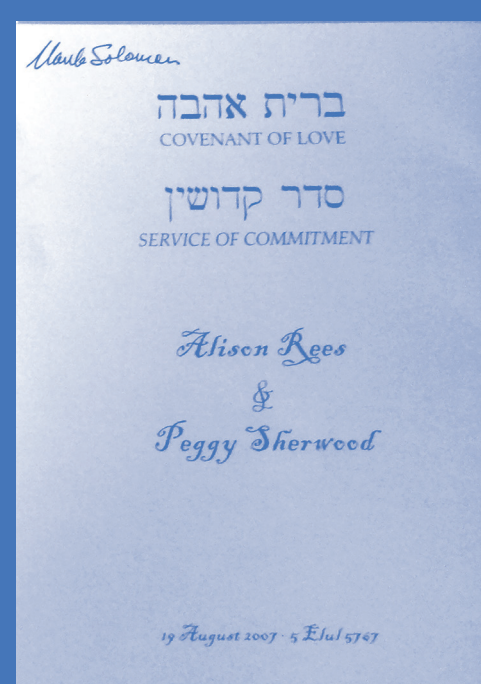
Under the Chuppah Fighting for the Right to Marry

“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 grandchildren. And that’s important to me partly because of Judaism – the structures and rituals that made up my childhood.”

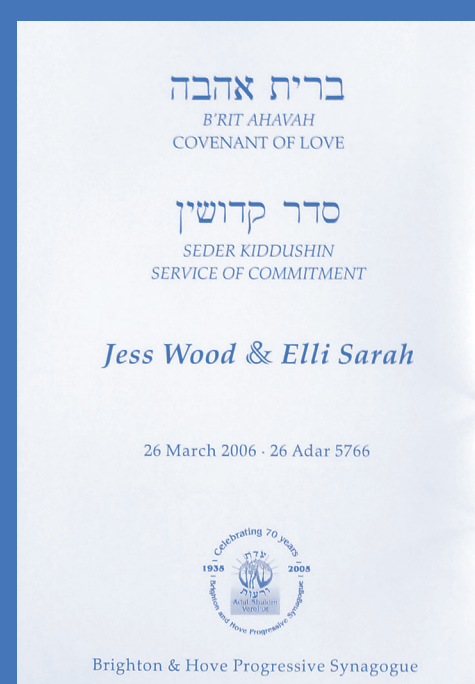
– Benjamin Cohen



Peggy and Alison on the day of their commitment ceremony.



Cover page: Berit ahava Alison and Peggy.



Cover page: Berit ahava Jess and Elli.

In October 1996, Rabbi Elli Sarah caused a storm of protest when she announced in a sermon that she was planning to officiate a lesbian marriage. Elli recalls the negative response her announcement brought:

“ The minute I mentioned that I was going to give this covenant of love, someone from the congregation stood up and said, ‘It is an abomination’. It showed to me that this was a big issue. All hell broke loose, and I had to give public apologies. ”

In 1998, the Working Party of the Rabbi’s Assembly published a report that intended to help individual Reform rabbis to decide 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, very contentious issue and brought out a huge amount of latent homophobia that I don’t think anybody realised was still there.”

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.

The development of this liturgy is probably the most significant milestone in Jewish LGBT history in the UK. Amazingly, its publication coincided with the Civil Partnership Act coming into effect in England and Wales in 2005.

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 August 2007, led by Rabbi Elli Sarah who had celebrated her own commitment ceremony with Jess Wood in 2006. Peggy and Alison 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.

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

Similarly, Reform movement Rabbi David Mitchell who comes from a family of Holocaust survivors believes that the community needs to be mindful of their roots:

“ I keep seeing these young LGBT Jews and I am very concerned that they’ve forgotten their history. ”

Even today, many LGBT Jews still struggle for acceptance within their communities and in themselves. Rabbi Elli Sarah notes that the most difficult issue today is around being transgender:

“ We must support trans people, but at the same time recognise that there is gender variance. There needs to be more of a debate [about trans people] within the Jewish world. ”

Lazlo, a trans man and queer performance artist from the USA, feels that the wider British audience still has a lot to learn when it comes to diversity.

“ I sometimes feel here I’m a double alien. It’s a double whammy having to come out as Jewish and as trans. ”

Because such ‘double alienation’ still plagues many Jewish LGBT people, advocates on behalf of the community. Alma Smith, a co-convenor of LGBT charity Keshet UK, describes herself as a non-LGBT ally. She believes that diversity issues have relevance beyond the specific groups to which they relate:

“ I do get asked a lot why I – as a straight, cisgender woman – volunteer for an LGBT organisation. Ultimately, I feel it’s a community issue beyond LGBT inclusion; there’s so much we need to be doing. ”

Looking to the future, Rabbi Sheila Shulman feels it is important to share Jewish lesbian-feminist history with future generations:

“ I don’t want us to disappear again. I would like us to be present in the now and in history. I am giving this interview [with Rainbow Jews] in the interest of not wanting our history to disappear. ”



World Pride March, London 2012.



Lazlo, a trans man, featured on the front page of queer journal Chroma, Spring 2006.
Credit: Shaun Levin.

“A Breed Apart No More”

How can you reconcile both Jewish and LGBT identities? Many of the Rainbow Jews interviewees felt when they were growing up that it would never be possible to make peace between being Jewish and LGBT.

As Reni Chapman described, LGBT Jews were “a breed apart”. Yet over the past 50 years, wider social changes and the more progressive, Jewish communities have enabled many to embrace their complex identity. Our interviewees tell us how it feels.

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

– Tess Joseph (aged 53)

“ 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 (aged 56)

“ The merging of my Jewish and my lesbian self was something that I had never believed would happen. And it has happened, and now these two parts of me are merged together. It’s wonderful actually. ”

– Peggy Sherwood (aged 60)

“ I was attracted by Judaism as a tenet of social justice. As a convert, I found that the Liberal community is terribly accepting of gay people and also on the ball about challenging prejudice in terms of race as well as sexual orientation. ”

– Nick Jackson, of mixed heritage Jamaican descent (aged 53)

“ 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 in certain times of my life to hide it, or at other times make a celebration out of it. ”

– Ed Teeger (aged 68)

“ I do feel very different, although I’m not. I’m Jewish, I’m white, I have a nice home, I have children, but I do feel very different. And sometimes I am inclined to say that my partner is female, but I think I might think twice before I did. But then I also think it’s none of anybody’s bloody business. ”

– Judith W.

“ The glass ceiling that used to be there for women is no longer there. For instance, in the Liberal and Reform movement in Britain women are going up to the top, and this goes together with a more liberal view of gays and lesbians. ”

– Rabbi Irit Shillor

“ 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 an iconic trip to the Krakow Holocaust camps with her partner.