

Interview Summary

Interviewer: Lara Atkin

Interviewee: Irit Shillor

Location: Montagu Centre, London

Interview code: RJ201308

Tack A: 0:00:17-0:02:02:0: Name, profession and involvement in LGBT activism both inside and outside of the Reform Jewish community.

Irit Shillor lives in Bishop Stortford and is the rabbi of the Reform community in Harlow, Essex. She leads services for the Jewish Lesbian and Gay Group. Irit explains about her participation in LGBT groups and position of Reform community on LGBT issues.

Track A 0:02:02:0-0:10:18:8: Attitude of Israeli society to LGBT people while she was growing up, her 'coming out' experience after she moved to England, the reactions of both her daughters and also her parents in Israel.

Born in Jerusalem and educated there. Describes Israel at the time as *'a fairly conservative place, being gay in Jerusalem was not really an option'*. Irit got married and had children but left Israel in 1982 and moved to England. Got divorced and met first woman lover. She describes her sexuality as a matter of attraction but also of choice. Also describes her activities in the JGLG group. Discusses sexuality and sexual preferences as well as the feelings surrounding her first experience with a female lover. *'When I finally met my first woman lover it was like coming home....It was like I could understand more about her body...and her mind too because we were talking a similar sort of language...In that sense it was home.'* She also discusses the reactions of her daughters to her coming out. *'I couldn't not come out to my children because how could I teach them to live a life of honesty and truth if they then turned to me and said, but you're living a lie.'* She also describes the reactions of her family in Israel. *'My father died many years ago and I don't think he ever reconciled himself to that...I think the saving grace was that I already had children.'*

Track A: 0:10:18:8- 0:13:52:7: Religion and sexuality, both in Israel and in England
Irit describes her upbringing as secular and that her sexuality played no part in that. This changed in England when she realised that to give her children a sense of their Jewish identity she would have to find a Jewish community for them to belong to. She describes how her need to give her children a Jewish identity led to her visiting different Jewish communities in England. She describes how her sexuality affected her involvement in different Jewish communities during the late 1980s.

Track A 0:13:52:7- 0:20:16:0: Attitudes towards LGBT issues in the Reform movement, the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group, Gay Pride marches.

Irit describes the attitude of the training college she trained to be a rabbi in to her sexuality and attitudes towards LGBT issues in the Reform movement. Challenges involved in engaging in a LGBT social life. Speaks more about the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group and her experiences on the Gay Pride marches.

Track B0:00-0:05:47.0 Parents' attitudes towards religion and her decision to be a rabbi, her religious beliefs.

Irit describes her parents' attitude towards religion and her mother's religious upbringing. *'There wasn't really a lot of Judaism in our home.. There was an awareness of being Jewish as a race, which is what the Nazis were trying to promote, rather than as a religion.'* Irit remembers going to the funeral of a child who drowned on a school trip while

she was teaching in Jerusalem and she describes how her secular mother said: *'It must be really comforting to be able to believe in G-D like that.'* She describes her mother's attitude to her becoming a rabbi. Irit talks further about her religious belief and the place of chance in it. She describes the effect of her rabbinical training on her religious belief including Holocaust and Feminist theology.

Track B 0:05:47:0- 0:09:55:2: Religion and inclusivity, gender, gender and society, gender and the Reform and Liberal movements.

Irit discusses how to make religious services more inclusive and ways to talk about G-D without using a gendered language. Links between this and her previous studies in Mathematics. Describes the gender roles and prejudices in society. Discusses changing attitudes towards gender in the Liberal and Reform movements in Britain. *'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 in both movements so a lot is being done there.'*

Track B 0:09:55:2-0:13:20:7: Irit describes her interfaith work with Islamic groups. Irit describes her interfaith work with Islamic communities in Harlow. Describes groups involving Muslim and Jewish groups working together and interpreting their texts together.

Track B 0:13:20:7-0:18:12:3: Acceptance of LGBT people in both progressive and Orthodox Judaism.

Irit describes how attitudes towards LGBT people in progressive Judaism are moving in a positive direction in both England and Germany. *'It's really no longer an issue and I see similar trends in English society.'* Describes how in progressive circles 25 years ago there was wide-spread acceptance and that this is spreading to other areas of English society. She hopes that at some point it will become less of an issue in Orthodox Judaism. She feels the trend towards conservatism in Israeli Orthodox religion is currently setting a trend in the rest of the world although she feels this is changing as a more liberal view of women goes together with a more liberal view of gays and lesbians.

Track C 0:00:001-0:16:55:1: Describes her involvement with Jewish communities in England as well as her work in Germany and Austria and the nature of the progressive Jewish communities there.

More on Jewish gay social life and interactions with gay clergy, particularly lesbian vicars. Irit describes how these interactions affected her work. Irit discusses how she moved to Winchester to take up a position as a rabbi and joined the Jewish community there and started working with them. She became a lay leader of the community and began to want to do more. As a student she became involved in more life cycle ceremonies such as baby blessings for same-sex couples and interfaith work. She describes her work with communities in Germany and Austria. Irit describes how she began coming to lead services in Germany and Vienna and her work there. Irit speaks about nature of Jewish community in Germany including the recent immigration of large numbers of Jews from the Former Soviet Union and the re-engagement of these communities with their Jewish identity and heritage. She finds that she needs to be discrete about her sexuality amongst some of the congregants from the Former Soviet Union whereas the German speaking members tend to have less of a problem with it but the FSU members tend to be more conservative. *'People ask me, how can you bear working in Germany? I'm a second generation survivor like almost everyone else in Israel, except those who are first generation and I keep saying I'm helping to build it (the Jewish community) up, in a sense we are proving that Hitler never won...and I think this is very important.'* Irit describes how

it is difficult and in Vienna she encountered a lot of anti-semitism. She describes how in Vienna she worked with some of the Catholic churches, creating an interfaith dialogue.

Track C 0:16:55:1-0:21:05:5

She describes her parents' family history and how they came to Israel in 1939 and how her parents lost family in the Holocaust. Irit's parents' attitudes towards her work as a rabbi and her work in Germany and Austria. Her parents' attitudes to their homelands in Austria and Hungary.