

Interview Code: RJ201326A  
Interviewer: Surat Knan  
Interviewee: Alma Smith  
Transcriber: Hannah Platt

### **General Information & Family Background [00:00:00 – 00:01:51]**

Alma was born in 1988 and grew up in Edgware. Her father is a rabbi in the local community; her mother is involved in Jewish education. Alma attended the largest Jewish secondary school in Europe (JFS) and says she had a good experience overall. She studied English literature at university and at the time of interview was training to be a social worker at the Hackney Council.

Alma's family are a very involved Jewish family and Alma became very involved in the faith herself. She was a youth leader in the reformed movement and also a movement worker. Recently Alma joined a North London synagogue with a reputation for being egalitarian. Alma is passionate about learning and teaching Judaism and in her spare time she is a volunteer with Keshet UK where she is co-chair.

### **Work with Keshet & LGBT Organizations [00:01:51 – 00:14:14]**

Within Keshet UK Alma trains professionals, individuals and future activists whilst simultaneously providing education co-ordination (LGBT activists go to schools to tell their personal stories). This is 'one of the reasons I am very excited about rainbow Jews'. Keshet has existed for over 2 years but in the last 18 months it has made training advocacy and education its real priority. Alma explains the difference between Keshet and other LGBT organizations is that Keshet is not an LGBT organization itself. Alma does not identify herself as LGBT but describes herself as an ally and an activist.

Alma grew up surrounded by open LGBT relationships that led her to understand that all love is good. It was shocking to Alma when she attended an orthodox Jewish school as a reformed Jew to find that people 'took for granted that all love is good, equal and positive'. She says that she would agitate about several things in school and actively disagree with teachers.

After university Alma lost two friends who both had difficulties with their families being unable to accept them for who they were. One was a young woman who had fallen in love with another woman and another was a young man who had been through gender transitioning. Alma was aware of the difficulties they had faced coming out and being accepted, neither of these friends were Jewish but their suicides came at a time when her previous school (JFS) taught a lesson on a program known as 'Jonah' that promotes it is possible to change ones sexuality. This sparked Alma to consider issues in the LGBT Jewish community as urgent. She wrote to the school and it was shared widely and provoked a huge response.

Keshet had their first session in an orthodox Jewish school this year. Despite moving forward Alma is frequently asked why she volunteers with Keshet even though she does not identify as LGBT, this frustrates her as this question is never asked to those volunteers that are LGBT themselves.

Alma says, *"It's a community issue that we are not making everyone feel welcome"* she describes this going beyond just LGBT inclusion and says *"there's so much more that we need to be doing as a community"*. Alma feels her commitment to LGBT in the Jewish community is *"easier"* as she does not have to face the prejudices her LGBT colleagues do such as coming out.

### **The Future for LGBT in the Jewish Community [00:14:14 – 00:17:38]**

In the future Alma would like to see more inclusion training for teachers in Jewish schools as well as for student Rabbis and youth leaders. There is also an LGBT Jewish youth group in the pipeline that Alma is fully supportive of so that LGBT Jewish teenagers and children have a place specifically for them and their needs.

Rabbi Lionel Blue is a close family friend of Alma's, she says that he worries people will presume Alma is a lesbian *"which they do"* and therefore she might come under discrimination and abuse, this saddens Alma as *"it says volumes about what it must have been like for him and early pioneers"*. Alma says she has never felt unsafe and feels she would have in previous decades.

### **Final thoughts on Rainbow Jews [00:17:38 – 00:18:53]**

*"I think Rainbow Jews is incredibly important and I think it's amazing and exciting and I can't wait for the launch. I wanted to do the interview because I think the ally's perspective is important and I think allies being involved is something that's happening more and it's part of the future. These testimonies, this history that we're now going to have so much more accessibly will be so useful in educating the whole Jewish community and beyond, the whole country. It's through stories we open peoples hearts and I think through Rainbow Jews we will do this".*

END OF INTERVIEW