

Interview of Karen Newman by Alison Turner on 30 October 2013 at the Montagu Centre for Rainbow Jews.

Karen talks about her background, she was born into an Orthodox Jewish family who went to synagogue 3 times a year, and kept kosher and festivals. She contrasts this with her current membership of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, which she likes because it is not just something people do on Saturdays, it is about understanding values and traditions and asking if there is right thing to do in a difficult situation. Her parents divorced when she was 2 and she stopped going to Cheder at age 10 when her mother remarried, saying there was nothing to work towards, no Batmitzvah in United Synagogue or Liberal Judaism at the time as Liberals concentrated on Kabbalat Torah.

Karen works in international development as a consultant in reproductive health and sustainable development and has worked in the National Abortion Campaign. Karen wanted a family that was a bit alternative and had warmth and a sense of belonging, so when they decided to start a family she and her partner Susan looked for a father who would be involved and that their daughter Lily would know. She is now discussing plans for Lily's Batmitzvah with her Rabbi.

Karen's early life was happy, she knew she was a lesbian from an early age, having crushes on teachers and a schoolmate, at university she decided she was a lesbian, but would not do anything about it. This lasted till she met Susan. Karen didn't feel the need to come out to her family, her grandmother always included Susan in her Friday night dinners, but they never had that conversation. Eventually she came out to her mother so that she would not be at a disadvantage when meeting Susan's parents. Her mother had remarried a RAF man who was very homophobic but she is outside that in his view. She decided that most people probably already knew she was a lesbian, so she didn't hide it and it has not been a big deal. Her sister is also a lesbian, though because she works in a girls boarding school she has to stay in the closet. She has not told her mother, she did not marry or have a child so it was not necessary.

Susan found and they joined the Liberal Jewish Synagogue (LJS) because they thought their daughter Lily should have a community that was a constant in her life and Karen's Judaism was more important to her than Susan's own humanism. Karen didn't want to leave the rest of her family who were in the United Synagogue but she could not join that, so she doesn't know if she could have moved to Liberal Judaism on her own. Rabbi Mark Solomon was the perfect transit for her and Karen is very supportive of Rabbi Alexandra's fusion of her own personal beliefs and values with the community to weld a community of friendship and this has made Judaism an increasingly important part of her life as she gets older. Similarly she did not join the Jewish Lesbian and Gay Group to be part of a Jewish community but it has become valuable to her. She finds the LJS diverse and welcoming and feels very at home there. She has a background in law and human rights so this led her to a faith-based value system that does not discriminate as the norm, unlike other religious branches though she admires that Dr Jonathan Sacks when he was Chief Rabbi he included homosexuals among those that suffered in the Holocaust. She says he's done a lot when he's explained prejudice to explain that we're all made in the image of God and that people who aren't like us are also people and some of that work has helped people visualise a God that embraces

diversity. She doesn't find that religion makes her a better person, she says she is still very arrogant and selfish, but faith can induce a bit of humility and she likes that.

Karen was astounded at the level of hate speech shown in the controversy about equal marriage, compared to speech about race for example, personally she would challenge anti-Semitism more than homophobia, depending on the circumstances. She is pleased that Liberal Judaism values gender equity and diversity and she likes the idea of civil partnership though she sees why it was politically important to go for equal marriage. Marriage has been moved away from the transfer of ownership of a woman from father to the groom, and that element was always absent from civil partnership. She sees it as a matter of conscience for ministers as for doctors with abortion, it is not right to force anyone to perform one if they are not comfortable with it.