

Interview Code: RJ201436A
Interviewer: Lisa Rodan
Interviewee: Joel Korn
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Childhood and Family (00:01:19 – 00:03:57)

Joel's family attends United Synagogue and are traditional Orthodox Jews. They were very involved in the community. His sister became '*ultra-orthodox*' as she grew up and his brother is agnostic. Joel's family is third generation Holocaust survivors, his grandfather escaped Poland and France when the Nazi's marched and boarded a boat to Liverpool, they eventually made their way to London.

Joel's relationship with his parents is good, they still struggle at times with his sexuality due to belonging to an orthodox community and his sister finds the stigma attached to her brothers sexual orientation difficult.

Coming Out (00:03:57 – 00:22:16)

Joel attended Jewish schools until the age of 16. He was mindful when he began to find other boys in his class attractive. The subject of sex and sexuality was not spoken about in his education aside from an old documentary that showed a flower being pollinated. He started to experiment with a friend of his who consequently became uncomfortable and told Joel's peers that Joel had initiated it. Joel was the subject of homophobic bullying in school; he says there wasn't much support in the early 90's for LGBT young people. His counsellor suggested he hide his sexuality in order to combat the bullies.

At 17 Joel attended college, which helped him understand more about diversity, as he was able to mix with different people rather than just people from the Jewish community. He felt accepted and met his first partner at college, Mark. At the time it was still illegal to have gay sexual intercourse under the age of 21. Mark was scared about being outed but when the relationship became serious Joel and Mark opted for an HIV test together, unfortunately Mark tested positive and passed away when Joel travelled overseas to Jewish summer camp in North Carolina.

On arrival back in the UK from summer camp he had been living with a very accepting and embracing staff at the camp, he came out to his sister and initially she said that they might want to keep it a secret from their parents. At this time Joel started exploring the gay scene in London and his parents became increasingly concerned as he started not coming home at night & going out to party. His friends from work had left a suggestive answerphone message on his family's phone regarding attending a gay nightclub and his Mum heard it. This forced him to come out to his Mother, she told him that his father had been living with manic depression and she was concerned how his coming out would affect his father's illness so Joel had to keep it a secret.

A book that was being written and had asked for a Jewish perspective on what being gay was like. The computer shut down midway through the process of Joel writing his account and he decided to come back to it the following day. His father discovered what he had written, he was astonished that Joel had written he felt his father wouldn't be accepting of his sexuality and '*he did his utmost to not let that happen*'. His father found a gay Jewish youth group for Joel to go to in London where Joel eventually first made contact with a reformed synagogue to attend.

After discovering there weren't many places for gay Jewish teenagers to connect Joel decided to create one. Initially around 10 to 15 people joined and would go to each other's households for dinners and "*get used to being Jewish and gay*". He says his group was important because it was teaching, "*you don't have to let go of Judaism to be gay*".

Joel doesn't follow an ultra-orthodox religion anymore but still has a Kosher home. After Joel's father discovered he was gay he says despite their varying levels of religion his parents wanted to reiterate that there was always a place for him. Despite all being different his family can all still engage with each other and his orthodox sister who initially wanted to keep things secret is at a point where they can talk openly.

Equal Marriage & Perceptions of Homosexuality (00:22:16 – 00:25:33)

Joel says it's interesting to see this new formality gay couples can put to their relationships. He thinks he would want a marriage rather than a civil partnership.

"It's been interesting to hear the change that's gone on, that there has been some openness to thought. I didn't think I would ever hear a time where I would hear the pope talk about being gay. Although it's not something that he could completely accept he still validated 'there are gay people out there' and I think similarly what we do need to think about is that we are not going to change orthodoxy but what we can do is keep creating debate and conversation about sexuality to form those links"

When he joined his new synagogue Joel felt it was important to have a discussion with his rabbi about homosexuality.

Sexual Identity (00:25:33 – 00:31:12)

When Joel was coming out he says it was very much a conversation about things they had seen on television such as the first lesbian kiss on a soap opera and an HIV positive character on Eastenders. When Joel came out the age of consent was still 21. He had been volunteering with youths and going in to schools and educating about homosexuality and teaching about homophobia and the results of it. He says this gave him an opportunity to give back to the community.

For the last 5 years Joel has been working in an HIV and AIDS center but before this he worked within Westminster council with a youth pride organization, he saw huge growth in the presence of young people in the LGBT discussion whilst working within youth groups.

The Future and The Past (00:31:12 – 00:42:47)

Joel says he thinks the future will be interesting. For himself this is as a single gay man living with HIV looking to foster children, he is looking to see whether policies in place will allow him to do so.

With the Internet Joel feels people are more isolated and hidden with their sexuality. There is still no community center in London for Lesbian and Gay people to come together and this disappoints Joel.

His most memorable time was his 21st birthday; he was able to bring together his homosexuality, his friends, his family and his Judaism in to one room together. *'That was very special, to integrate all the different sides of me'*.

END OF INTERVIEW