

Rainbow Jews Exhibition Summary for Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah

Interview Code: RJ201314A
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Interviewee: Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah
Transcriber: N/A
Summariser: Surat

Active years (bold as appropriate): Pre-1968, 1968-1981, 1981-2000, 2000-

Pre-1968 Activity

Knowing

'I was what classically used to be called a 'tomboy', but I had a very definite sense of myself as kind of choosing a male identity ;when I was little I supposed in those days, I was born in 1955, the options were very binary in terms of gender. So I called myself John and I called my little sister Julia 'Jimmy'. I loved it when people thought I was a boy. I would only wear button-fly jeans.(03:31-03:58). 'I was often called Sunny and Lad when I went out (04:30-35). 'It was actually a shock to become a woman, really.'(04:40-45)

Religion (or their Jewishness)

Elli's Mum was fairly religious and sang in Yiddish and Hebrew on Shabbat; her Dad had belonged to a progressive synagogue in Vienna but wasn't interested in religion: *'Whenever my Mum sang in Yiddish, he tended to leave the room.'*(02:00-02:05). Elli enjoyed listening to her Mum: *'It was like singing her to us as opposed to signing together.'* (03: 28—3:32)

Family and Relationships

Ashkenazi middle-class family of Holocaust survivors hailing from Vienna (Dad) and Russia (Mum); her Dad was after his release from Dachau a *'broken man'* (0:16). Elli's parents met in South Africa in 1947; they spoke in German to each other when they didn't want to be heard. They didn't have a happy marriage: *'they were very different people; there was also a clash of cultures - between Eastern European and Central European culture'* (01:30-01:39). Elli had a very strict upbringing.

'It's interesting though that my parents allowed me to do this; I supposed it's much more tolerated for girls to be tomboys rather than the other way round.'(03:59-04:10)

'I developed really quickly' (05:45). 'I tried to be a woman and do the girl bit, I was one of the first in my class to have a boyfriend (..) but on my 14th birthday I decided I was never going to go out with a boy again.'(05:55-06:05)

Politics, Law and Activism

Pride and Pleasure

1968-1981 Activity

Knowing

'I knew very quickly it wasn't right' {the marriage}. (08:56). 'I cut my hair off and started wearing his jackets' (09:10-15). 'I had the freedom to be more myself, once I'd done the right thing and got a husband. Nobody was going to question anymore whether I was a proper woman. But it didn't last.' (09:20-36).

'Here I was, I had left my marriage, in November 78', it was quite a big learning curve and it was an opportunity to explore my identity but I felt very alone. So, I came out fully to myself in that situation.' (10:04-24)

Religion (or their Jewishness)

Elli encounter issues with being Jewish and the lesbian sub-culture: *'I felt always strongly Jewish, but becoming a Lesbian separatist wasn't as easy.'* (18:30-19:15)
'I couldn't just join Lesbian nation. There was something else in my identity that actually meant that I was in connection with a culture that included men as well.'

'The whole sisterhood thing was fine as long as you were 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; you had different allegiances. You couldn't just abandon those allegiances, because they are fundamental to your identity – fundamental to my identity was what it was to be a Jew.' (19:35-20:01)

Family and Relationships

In June 1973, Elli was set up by her Mum with a guy, and got married against her parent's wishes in 1975. *'It was a form of escape'* (08:45) *'It was very unfair toward him. What could I have said? I didn't know anybody else. I just didn't know what was possible'*(17:50-18:15)

'I fell in love with a woman and went to Israel where she was in a Kibbutz. But it turned out rather badly, because she wasn't interested in me. (09:55-10:00)

Elli came back to London from Israel/Galilee end of June 1979 moving back with her parents, but got thrown out.

Elli's Mum was the first person she came out to, who was supportive - although it was never fully understood.

Politics, Law and Activism

Elli's first gay outing was at a club called 'Sappho Net' in London (1979?), but she didn't enjoy puns and clubs. She preferred activism and joined the 'Lesbian Line' collective, a phone service; she did Pride Marches and the women's/feminist movement, the Women's Resource Centre – the lesbian sub-culture. She came out fully only in this environment *'exploring new possibilities'* (17:30). Elli was involved in Socialism/ Marxism but put off my Anti-Zionism. Got involved in

Women's Study group and publications, and dropped out of her teaching career in 78'.

Pride and Pleasure

1981-2000 Activity

Knowing

Religion (or their Jewishness)

In January 1982 (or 81), Elli attended the first Jewish Feminist Conference (at the Sobell Jewish Day Centre in Golder's Green): *'From this point onwards my focus was putting those two things together [being gay and Jewish] (20:40-50)*

Elli met Sheila Shulman in 82 at a Jewish Lesbian Group: *'it was a powerful experience, because for all of us we were putting together what it meant for us to be a Lesbian, to be a Jew. I could see strong similarities because in both cases people would not necessarily know you were; they involved coming out.'* (21:00-45). They were both *'Minority marginal identities'*, *'completely obscured unless you came out.'*

'I had always felt Jewish,(..) but it was all vicarious; I didn't have any knowledge. But did I want to be defined by Anti-Semitism?' (23:50-58). Hence, Elli decided to learn more about being Jewish, and in 1983 went to her first Torah class at Leo Baeck College. After enrolling into a Hebrew course in Central London, Elli realised how powerful her Jewish identity was (27:15), but did not want to move back to Israel. She wanted to be an intellectual, and decided to do Jewish Studies and become a Rabbi (September 83). *'It seemed to solve my existential dilemma.'*(32:15). She wanted to help make Judaism more LGBT inclusive. Elli was surprised that Sheila had applied at LBC in the same year. They were bullied and put on 5 year probation for no reason whatsoever.

Elli joined her first synagogue in October 1985; moved on later to Finchely Progressive and teaching Cheder at Finchley Reform. Finally, both Elli and Sheila were given a 3rd year placement in a congregation. In the 4th year she got assigned to Leicester and other synagogues. At that time, the Rabbis (e.g. Andrew Goldstein) *'was not keen to have a lesbian rabbi'* (38:20). However, Elli got a lot of support from an *'amazing woman'*, **Reni Chapman** (!), at Leicester, a smaller, more informal congregation.

In the 5th year, 1988, before ordination (which was in 1989), Elli finally succeeded and a Reform/mainstream congregation wanted her to become their Rabbi. In 1992/3, however, an ex-chair wrote a letter complaining that she was *'shoving Lesbianism/Feminism down people's throats, which wasn't true'* – and *'molest their daughters'*. (41:20) But the 15-odd members at an AGM *'voted'* for her. *'There was a lot of homophobia, but also support.'* (42:40).

In 1998, (45:40+), after Sheila and Elli had been ordained there was an extensive meeting to decide if they should be allowed to join the assembly of Rabbis – despite the fact that they were already active in the community and membership should be automatic. *'It was decided in our favour, but shows you the atmosphere.'* (46:30). Elli remained positive.

Early 1994, Elli became – after albeit a long ‘good practice’ procedure - eventually director with the Reform Movement, working alongside Rabbi Lionel Blue and others. *‘Everything went very well, too well, (...), I thought I was unassailable’.* (44:40-45:03). Yet, Elli realised that the US had various LGBT Jewish materials and wanted to introduce them into the UK.

1995, Elli established a working party on same sex commitment after having raised the issue at the assembly of Rabbis.(47:00). In February 1996, a BBC programme, Heart of the Matter, she was on the programme with Peter Tatchell, talking about LG commitment ceremonies, it was out in the open. Yet, at Kol Nidre, *‘I made a big mistake - to give a sermon on the theme of ‘covenant of love.’ (49:00+) 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. (50:00). It showed to me that this was a big issue.’ ‘All hell broke loose (...), I had to give public apologies; it was very humiliating.’(52:00+)*

(53:40+) ‘I tried soldiering on, but I realised that actually they’d all be happier if I left.’ In March, she handed in her notice. **It was all over the JC front page!**

She left in July 1997, became part of the Liberal Rabbinic Conference, and applied in Brighton & Hove, but was turned down. Elli had a good experience at a progressive congregation in Amsterdam in autumn 1997, and subsequently in 1998, Bristol Progressive asked her to do a service, which was rather restorative – she stayed until 2000. Later on, Elli had a conversation with Brighton & Hove again, just after a book was reviewed in the JC that featured Elli’s article on same sex weddings. In the end, this publicity worked for her. Also, at that time, Finchley Reform had failed to employ a Lesbian Rabbi – after having failed to call for a 2/3 majority vote *‘for a Lesbian Rabbi only’*. Elli said to Brighton that it was useless to ask the congregation, and instead just make a decision based on an interview. (1:05:00). She first wasn’t going to get the job, but Rabbi Millstein (?) stood up for her: *‘I’ve been waiting for this for 12 years.’* So, she got the job. Things got better and more supportive at Brighton when it comes to same sex issues. *‘I feel proud’ (01:08:50)*

Family and Relationships

Politics, Law and Activism

Being ‘out’ as both Lesbian and Jew wasn’t easy, e.g. around the time of Israel invading Lebanon in 82. The Jewish Feminist Group was involved in **Spare Rib** and **Outright** magazines and had to respond to extreme Anti-Zionism. Women’s Liberation Newsletter also very anti.

Pride and Pleasure

2000-Present Activity

Knowing

Religion (or their Jewishness)

Family and Relationships

Partner Jess and Elli started a relationship properly in 2003 – after meeting in 2000 – and had a civil partnership on 24 March 2006. *'We had our Chuppah in the synagogue'(1:11:30+), and people came out saying that it was the most amazing wedding they'd been to. That felt like a bit of a vindication.'*

(1:16:00+) Both Jess and Elli are similar and both don't feel comfortable with the 'binary straight-jacket' of the way we think of gender.'

Politics, Law and Activism

In 2000, The Working Party got under way to campaign for same sex commitment c. (with Rabbis Danny Rich, Margaret Jacobi etc). The 1st and 2nd version of policy passed with the Rabbinic Conference and LJ Board; *it was a compromised policy but 'we did get Kiddushim in Hebrew' (1:09:40).*

Elli was chair of publication, and the team (e.g Mark Solomon_ published a liturgy for same sex commitment in December 2005. *'That was incredibly confirming to me.'* (1:10:20+).

Pride and Pleasure

(1:12:50) 'Overall, my determination and my belief in people's capacity to respond to change, once they had the opportunity to be really made aware of the issue, and to know me, has been vindicated.(..)Brighton Progressive has become inclusive...It has worked.'

Meta Questions

Why is the interviewee sharing their story?

Any hopes for the future?

(1:14:00+) 'Where am I now? I'm 58 (..) The burning issue is around 'trans' – and to take the story full circle, I'd say that, when I was young and I wanted to be a boy and called myself a boy's name, one of the things I realised, that actually for a long time I thought I was part of the third sex. I don't feel I fit very easily into the binary gender; because there are aspects of me that are very obviously - I'm very determined, I'm very forthright, I'm very wilful – I'm a lot of the things that people associate with men (..) But I'm also a woman, but I'm not a woman in any of the ways that mainstream presents women. (..) I feel that binary gender is a terrible chain of oppression – the way people are forced. It's like compulsive heterosexuality in a way: many more people would be lesbian, gay or just be bisexual if it wasn't for the assumption that we're all heterosexual. And equally, the assumption that men will be men and women will be women. And, I just like the idea of transcending gender a bit. I'm not interested in becoming a man, but at the same time my way of being a woman is different. I think, there are many women like me. I think binary gender is a problem; that gender is much more of a spectrum - just like sexuality is. It's much more diverse.'

'We must support trans people but at the same time recognize that there's gender variance; there needs to be more of a debate within the Jewish world as well.'

My Rabbinate is dedicated to inclusion in every respect - to embracing diversity, to enabling and facilitating inclusion.'

(1:17:20+) 'I have been on a journey to enable and facilitate myself to be able to live in this world and find a place for myself. But at the same time I have been doing all I can to enable and facilitate other people - LGBT people and anybody who doesn't feel mainstream that feels on the margins and excluded. There are so many people, the whole issue who's Jewish, the whole Jewish identity..(..).

'Ultimately, what it means for me to be a Lesbian Jew is to be somebody who enables others to be all of who they are and enables and facilitates the creation of community in which everybody with all their differences can find a place.'