

Interview for Rainbow Jews.

Interviewee: Alison Turner

Interviewed by: Surat Knan

Date and place of interview: 13 May 2014 at the Montagu Centre.

0.00-08.29 Origins and early life.

Alison described her family origins, her upbringing and Jewish identity. She was brought up by her grandmother after the early death of her mother, with the help of a live-in nanny. She was catapulted into a "normal" Jewish household when her father remarried, when she was 10 years old. The family were members of the United Synagogue and she was brought up in North-West London. She went to a mixed primary school, then to a grammar school for girls, so men were quite peripheral to her early life. She had her first boyfriend when she was 16 years old.

Bisexual identity, Bicon and *Bisexual Horizons*.

She was not aware of a bisexual identity till much later, when she got involved in the feminist movement, around 1982, she went to her first Bicon in 1984, but there were few Jewish women there. She read *Bisexual Lives* and became a member of the Off Pink Collective who produced it, and worked on their second book, *Bisexual Horizons*, which was published in 1996. There was another Jewish woman involved in Off Pink, both books were anthologies with contributions from many different people. There was one Jewish woman among the contributors, Naomi Tucker, whose piece was called *Passing: pain or privilege?* This talked about "passing" as ordinary, people not seeing that she is Jewish or bisexual. Other people would say that she was so lucky to pass and she thinks how lucky is it that nobody notices or understands the whole of what she is? Alison could identify with that.

Coming out.

Alison tried coming out to her rabbi and she said Alison didn't have the problems she had, because Alison was in an opposite sex relationship and she was in a lesbian relationship. It was as though she thought that Alison was in a straight relationship, which Alison didn't find true at all. She didn't like having her sexuality minimised and dismissed, it was like being told "it's just a passing phase". She has a friend who wrote a dissertation, for which she interviewed only those who had been bisexual for over 10 years, because it may be a passing phase for some people, but not for all, for some people, it is their identity.

08.30-11.41 Being bi and Jewish

There was not a lot of overlap between her bi and Jewish identities, early on she was in the United Synagogue, then she moved to Liberal Judaism. She tried running a workshop at Bicon for Jewish bisexuals but only one other person came to it. She didn't know if she would be welcome at Jewish lesbian and gay groups, though she has heard since that they are welcoming. She met her partner at Bicon, she had known him for many years, they got together in 2006 at Glasgow Bicon. He was not Jewish but was interested in Judaism, he had searched online but only found Orthodoxy. She introduced him to Progressive Judaism, he converted to it and they were married at a Liberal synagogue in 2009.

11.42-26.00 Involvement in Liberal Judaism, bisexual movement, Rainbow Jews and Israel.

Her first husband was supportive but not Jewish or bisexual. He died in 2004. Now she is married to a bisexual Jew, it does make a difference, she can keep a kosher home, go to services and celebrate festivals with him, and go to Bicon together, and mix with other bisexuals. She joined Liberal Judaism in the late 1990s, first the Settlement Synagogue, then after she'd moved house, she joined North London Progressive Synagogue. There she met Rabbi Marcia Plumb, who got her to work in the library, then she was on Council and finally she was Secretary. Most members were

elderly, the younger people had moved away, and it closed in 2002. Alison was part of the group which founded North London Progressive Jewish Community, now Kehilla North London. She has not joined any Jewish LGBT groups, because she was not sure how welcoming they would be. She had experiences with feminists and lesbians who thought being bisexual was just a phase. She was a member of a synagogue with a lesbian rabbi who pooh-poohed her and told her she was not part of the LGBT community. She thinks it can be improved, it would be good to know if there are more bisexuals out there.

It was interesting that at the launch of the Rainbow Jews exhibition someone said "what about the bisexuals?" Alison doesn't know how much Rainbow Jews can publicise that there are some Jewish bisexuals out there. She finds that now she has moved again, she has a bisexual rabbi, though she also doesn't make anything of it in her rabbinate. Alison knows Rabbi Sheila Shulman was told not to talk about it, not to make a fuss, when she first went to Leo Baeck College. She doesn't know if anyone said anything to her new rabbi, or if that was her own decision? Like that rabbi, Alison does tend to feel that her sexuality is her own private business, in her working or professional life. She thinks if she is not interested in that person in a personal way, in the possibility of "having a relationship with them" kind of way, what business is it of their's what her sexual orientation is?

She would find it interesting to go to the Jewish LGBT and the bisexual communities and put them in touch with each other and see if there is any overlap. She was interested in Rainbow Jews because the Project Manager approached her since she is the archivist of Liberal Judaism and asked what there was in the archives on LGBT matters? She is glad it is an LGBT project and not just lesbian and gay. She joined the project and found it interesting to listen to other people's stories and to form a permanent record. Some synagogues have a lot of archive material, but it is very variable. It was very disappointing that no-one documented Beit Klal Yisrael and she wonders what other groups have? It was similar with feminism, new feminists weren't so much aware that there had been feminism before. It is always interesting to know what battles had been fought.

There was a major falling-out between Jewish feminists and lesbians and other lesbians and feminists when Israel went into Lebanon, it was a key time for finding out who our friends were, as documented in Elli Sarah's book *Trouble-making Judaism*. It was like battlelines being drawn, it was such a huge argument. It reminded Alison of when she did her degree, she ended up at the Polytechnic of North London and did a degree in librarianship. There were a whole lot of leftist groups who wanted her to support every small oppressed group except Israel. They understood that Israel was the aggressor and the Palestinians were the victims, whereas she understood the Israelis come from people who had been the victims. The Jews needed a refuge, a couple of her aunts didn't make it, they were on their way out of France during the Second World War when they were declared stateless, sent back, and perished in Auschwitz. People don't seem to understand it was not a far-off conflict, it affected many families in living memory.

It is sad when Israel is the aggressor, they are the last ones that ought to do that. The fight between Israel, Zionism and the Left in universities and the press concerns her. There were anarchists coming to Bicon complaining about the "pinking" of Israel. They were saying it was putting itself forward as a gay destination and covering up atrocities that were going on. Alison thinks that Israel is the only place in the Middle East where you could have a LGBT culture, like Gay Pride in Tel Aviv, a Pink City and a Pink Pound. They are completely welcoming of LGBT people, it is very destructive of people to suggest that it's being put on to cover up oppression. There are two completely different narratives going on, it is difficult to see both. She was told when she went there that it is more complicated than you think. It would be interesting to counter the pinkwash talk at Bicon, she didn't want it to become a shouting match. She doesn't know how much they would be open to a contrary view, it may descend into shouting, she would be interested to do it.

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