

THE ZEAL FOR JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS: CELEBRATING LGBTQ+ PRIDE – Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah
European Union for Progressive Judaism Pride Shabbat, 3rd July 2021 – 23rd Tammuz 5781

Shabbat shalom everyone. It's an honour and a great pleasure to be invited to speak today at this first European Union for Progressive Judaism Pride *Shabbat* morning service.

I would like to take this opportunity to express heartfelt solidarity for all those living in countries where LGBTQ+ people do not have the protection of equality laws and experience homophobic and transphobic abuse and persecution, both by the authorities and in popular culture. I'm going to speak from my experience in Britain in the hope that the journey to equality and inclusion, both in the wider society and within the Jewish community, may serve as inspiration for what is possible.

I want to begin by paying tribute to the first gay rabbi in Britain, the extraordinary Rabbi Lionel Blue, *Zichrono livrachah* – May his memory be for blessing. My tutor during my five years of rabbinic training at Leo Baeck College and my ordaining rabbi, Lionel experienced life as a gay man when homosexuality was still illegal. Lionel shared his unique wisdom and insights as a gay Jew and a rabbi, when he addressed the Gay Christian Movement in 1981, on 'Being Godly and Gay'.ⁱ

Today, I feel the loss of Lionel and also the loss of Sheila Shulman. When we both received *s'michah* on 9 July 1989, we became the first lesbian rabbis in the world. Sadly, Sheila died in 2014 just a few months after the 25th anniversary of our ordinations was celebrated with a special day conference at Leo Baeck College.ⁱⁱ *Zichronah livrachah* – May her memory be for blessing.

Today, is a moment to acknowledge our losses, the continuing challenges faced by LGBTQ+ people who are still experiencing discrimination and persecution – and also to celebrate. Because today over 20% of the progressive rabbinate in Britain is LGBT+ and LGBT+ Jews now have a home within the British progressive Jewish community. So, how has this enormous change come about?

Since the 1967 Sexual Offences Act decriminalised 'homosexual acts' between two consenting males over the age of 21 in private, legal changes in Britain over the past 50 years have resulted in an equal age of consent,ⁱⁱⁱ equal marriage^{iv} and transgender people being able to have their birth certificates altered to reflect their new name and gender identity.^v But let's not forget: these legal changes, and those in other countries, have only happened because LGBTQ+ people engaged in a struggle for acknowledgement of our full human rights – beginning with the landmark moment when the gay clientele of the Stonewall bar in Greenwich Village, New York, started a riot on June 28, 1969, in response to a police raid and repeated police harassment.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, activism took the form of the Gay Liberation Front, founded in 1972, on the one hand, and Lesbian Feminism, on the other. It was Lesbian Feminism that put

the ‘L’ into what later became LGBT. For lesbians in Britain as elsewhere, our struggle for liberation did not have a legal dimension, but without the Lesbian Feminist challenge to Patriarchy, and to what the Jewish lesbian feminist writer and poet, Adrienne Rich called ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, lesbian existence would have remained invisible.^{vi}

By the late 1980s, the ‘rainbow flag’ first developed a decade earlier,^{vii} proclaimed an alliance of solidarity encompassing ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’, ‘bisexual’ and ‘transgender’ people – hence: LGBT – and embracing a plurality of identities. While ‘bisexuality’ challenges binary assumptions concerning *sexual orientation*, the inclusion of ‘transgender’ challenges binary male/female notions of *gender*.

We have seen enormous changes in progressive states across the world over the past 50 plus years^{viii} and an ever more encompassing rainbow – extended even further, with an extra, ‘Q’ to acknowledge those who are ‘Queer’ and/or ‘questioning’ of their gender and/or sexuality, and an ‘I’ to acknowledge those who are intersex. But it’s not all good news. 71 countries continue to criminalise LGBTQ+ people, including 32 African nations, 23 nations of the Middle East and Asia, 9 nations in the Americas, and 7 nations in Oceania. In addition, while not outlawing ‘homosexuality’, in 2013 Russia enacted an ‘anti-gay propaganda law’.^{ix} And hatred of LGBTQ+ people doesn’t only happen in those places where persecution is enshrined in the law. In recent years, November 20 has been designated as Transgender Day of Remembrance in honour of Rita Hester, a transgender woman of colour, who was murdered in her home in Allston, Massachusetts, USA, on November 28, 1998.^x

Meanwhile, growing equality and inclusion across the progressive world has not led automatically to change within the Jewish world. For that to happen, Jewish LGBTQ+ people had to come knocking at the door of Jewish life – which is what Sheila and I did in 1984, when, members of the same Jewish lesbian group, and without discussing it, we both applied to the Leo Baeck College rabbinic programme. I can’t speak for Sheila. For my part, my decision to apply involved the realisation that to have a chance to effect real change, it was no good being part of a radical cadre, separated from society. I needed to work to generate change from the inside. My way of doing this was by joining the mainstream Jewish community and doing what I could to contribute to making Jewish life egalitarian and inclusive and fit for purpose in the late 20th century.

So, two lesbian feminists on their journeys. But of course, once Sheila and I had survived being on probation throughout the five years of our rabbinic training and been ordained, soon, there were many more LGBTQ+ Jews who now knew it was possible to become a rabbi. And just as important, Jewish LGBTQ+ community was enlivened by the contributions of rainbow rabbis.

To give two major examples. First, the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Group,^{xi} founded in 1972 as the Jewish Gay Group; the oldest of its kind in the world. A few lesbians, including me, discovered the Jewish Gay Group in 1987 after attending an international conference of Gay and Lesbian Jews in Amsterdam. At that time, it was a male-only enclave. But before long, we managed to make space for ourselves and get ‘Lesbian’ added to the name. I feel very proud to have led JGLG’s monthly *Erev Shabbat* services in those early days, joined in 1992 by Rabbi Mark Solomon, a refugee from the United Synagogue, who then went on to make an important contribution to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ Jews within Liberal Judaism. Nowadays, a host of rainbow rabbis regularly lead the monthly *Erev Shabbat* service. Meanwhile, two years ago there was another name-change and the JGLG became the Jewish LGBTQ+ Group.

My second example is *Beit Klal Yisrael*,^{xii} the congregation founded by Rabbi Sheila Shulman and a group of lesbian feminist friends in 1990 as an inclusive Jewish community. Led and nurtured by Sheila with love for so many years, Sheila also nurtured many individuals to realise their potential to become rabbis, in particular, LGBTQ+ people, including Rabbi Judith Rosen-Berry, who succeeded her. The current incumbent is another lesbian, Rabbi Anna Posner.^{xiii}

Meanwhile, my particular rabbinate has been dedicated to making mainstream congregations more inclusive. It was a rocky road for the first few years, but I refused to give up hope. I started working as rabbi of Brighton and Hove Progressive in December 2000 and today BHPS has become a truly inclusive community, in which LGBTQ+ individuals, couples and families can participate, contribute their gifts, and celebrate their lives and their milestones. The practical changes that have made inclusion a reality encompass: same-sex marriage ceremonies, baby blessings for the children of LGBTQ+ individuals and couples, the option for young people to be gender neutral and become *b’ mitzvah* (rather than *bar* or *bat*), the opportunity to mark gender transition Jewishly, and the provision of all-gender toilets.

So, a changing Jewish landscape because of the work of rabbis and congregations – and, also because of change at a movement level in response to the presence and contributions of rainbow rabbis. Liberal Judaism, for example, has gone on a journey towards inclusion, which in turn has served to support and encourage congregational change. In 2002, LJ set up a rabbinic working party on same sex ceremonies on which I served and in the next few years, there were a series of landmark developments. In December 2005, LJ published the Working Party’s liturgy for same-sex ceremonies to coincide with the Civil Partnership Act coming into force.^{xiv} As the Equal Marriage Campaign gained momentum, with leadership from the Rabbinic Conference, Liberal Judaism gave public support for equal marriage, and also began working with Queer and Trans Jews UK.^{xv} LJ also launched other projects: Rainbow Jews^{xvi}, recording Jewish LGBTQ+ history from the 1950s to today, the trans interfaith project Twilight People^{xvii} and Rainbow Pilgrims, a project exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ migrants and refugees^{xviii}.

I have spoken about the development of LGBTQ+ inclusion in Britain in general, and in the British Jewish community, in particular, in order to demonstrate that *change is possible when we commit ourselves to generating change*. This week's *parashah Pin'chas*, includes a story about when the five daughters of Tz'lophchad, a descendant of Manasseh, the son of Joseph, petitioned Moses with the request that their father having died without any sons, they could be allowed to inherit his property. Their petition was granted and an amendment to the law was made to allow daughters to inherit when their father died without having any sons.^{xix} In next week's double *parashah, Mattot-Mas'ei*, in response to an appeal from the daughters' male relatives, the inheritance law was then modified again with the decree that in these circumstances, daughters could only marry within their tribe to ensure that their father's estate remained within the tribe.^{xx}

So, not a huge victory for women's rights, but a significant one – not least, because it demonstrated that the law could be changed in response to the call for change. With the emergence of progressive Judaism in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century, being responsive to the call for change and to changing circumstances became a key principle. A century later, in 1899, Lily Montagu, one of the three founders of Liberal Judaism in Britain and the first Honorary Secretary of the World Union for Progressive Judaism when it was established in 1926^{xxi}, encapsulated the task of Progressive Judaism. I quote: 'to satisfy the needs of the age':^{xxii}

In focusing on the narrative of the daughters of Tz'lophchad, you may think that I'm avoiding the less edifying story of Pi'nchas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, with which the portion that takes his name opens; a tale that begins at the end of the previous *parashah, Balak*. This story introduces Pi'nchas, by telling us what he did when he saw one of his brethren consorting with a Midianite woman. I quote: ^{xxiii} '... he rose up from the midst of the congregation, and took a spear in his hand / and he went after the Israelite man into the chamber and thrust both of them through, the Israelite man, and the woman through her belly.'

Obviously, we recoil from the murderous zealotry displayed by Pi'nchas and by all those who continue to kill in the name of God. But as we celebrate Pride today, we are challenged to recognise that zealotry is not always a destructive impulse, and to acknowledge the zeal for equality that has propelled individuals and communities to engage in the struggle for LGBTQ+ inclusion. We need that kind of *constructive* zealotry. As I say this, I'm aware that as *Elisheva Tikvah Sarah bat Y'hudit*^{xxiv} *u'Phi'nchas*, my parents' Hebrew names are a constant reminder to me of the murderous underside of zealotry. Nevertheless, my parental inheritance apart, my personal experience of fighting for LGBTQ+ equality and inclusion, demonstrates that in order to effect change, sometimes you have to be a zealot; a zealot for justice and human rights. So, today as we celebrate this first Pan-European Pride *Shabbat*, let us give thanks for

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all the pioneering zealots and recite the blessing that thanks the Eternal One for keeping us alive, sustaining us, and bringing us to this time:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁהֵחֵיבנוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזִמְן הַזֶּה
*Baruch Attah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech ha-olam,
shehecheyyanu, v'kiy'manu, v'higi'anu laz'man ha-zeh.*

And let us say: Amen.
Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah

ⁱ Rabbi Lionel Blue, *Godly and Gay*. The Fourth Michael Harding Memorial Address, Gay Christian Movement, London, 1981. See also rabiellisarrah.com: 'Remembering Rabbi Lionel Blue, Z"l', my tribute to Lionel, delivered at the *Erev Pride Erev Shabbat* service, held at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue on 7th July 2017: <http://www.rabiellisarrah.com/remembering-rabbi-lionel-blue-zl/>

ⁱⁱ The Leo Baeck College Day of Celebration was held on 23rd June 2014. Rabbi Dr Rachel Adler was the key-note speaker. Her lecture, 'Queer Rabbis Talking Their Way In' is included in a special issue of *European Judaism* in memory of Rabbi Sheila Shulman, Z"l (Vol. 48, No. 2, Autumn 2016, pp. 6-13), together with my response, 'Reflections on the Journey of a Lesbian Feminist Queer Rabbi' (pp. 14-21).

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.youngstonewall.org.uk/lgbtq-info/legal-equality>

^{iv} <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2013/30/contents/enacted/data.htm>

^v <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/7/notes/contents>

^{vi} Adrienne Rich's essay, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* was published as a pamphlet in 1980.

^{vii} The rainbow flag was first designed in 1978 by Gilbert Baker of San Francisco.

http://pflagdetroit.org/story_of_the_rainbow_flag.htm

^{viii} As of January 2021, 29 countries recognised same-sex marriage

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_by_country_or_territory

^{ix} <http://76crimes.com/76-countries-where-homosexuality-is-illegal/> .

^x *Human Rights Campaign*, which works for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, states on its website: 'TDOR ... provides a forum for transgender communities and allies to raise awareness of the threat of violence faced by gender variant people and the persistence of prejudice felt by the transgender community. Communities organize events and activities including town hall style "teach-ins," photography and poetry exhibits and candlelit vigils. These activities make anti-transgender violence visible to stakeholders like police, the media and elected officials.'

<http://www.hrc.org/campaigns/transgender-day-remembrance>.

^{xi} <http://www.jglg.org.uk/>

^{xii} <http://www.bky.org.uk/>

^{xiii} <https://www.bky.org.uk/rabbi/>

^{xiv} *Covenant of Love – B'rit Ahavah* (Liberal Judaism, 2005). See www.liberaljudaism.org. Also see 'Marriage by any Other Name', chapter 8 of my book, *Trouble-Making Judaism*. (David Paul Books, 2012)

^{xv} <http://transgenderjews.org.uk/>

^{xvi} <http://www.rainbowjews.com/>

^{xvii} <http://www.twilightpeople.com/>

^{xviii} <https://www.rainbowpilgrims.com/>

^{xix} *Pin'chas*, Numbers 27:1-11.

^{xx} *Mas'ej*, Numbers 36:1-12.

^{xxi} The WUPJ was inaugurated at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London in 1926. Claude Montefiore, another founder of Liberal Judaism was the first President of the WUPJ <https://wupj.org/about-us/history/>

^{xxii} 'Spiritual Possibilities of Judaism Today'. Published in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 1899.

^{xxiii} *Balak*, Numbers 25: 7b-8.

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^{xxiv} The Book of Judith, is included in the Septuagint, the first Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures and in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles, but was not included in the canon of the Hebrew Bible. It tells the story of how Judith cut off the head of Holofernes, the Assyrian General and saved her people from oppression