

## Marking 25 years on the Way to Liberation

Dear friends: It is wonderful to be here this evening, celebrating together and marking an important milestone on the way to liberation. The last time I stood on this spot was when I gave my ordination address 25 years ago.

As we gather together, I'm very much aware of the absence of Rabbi Lionel Blue. My tutor and ordaining Rabbi, he is a unique figure, loved by many people, within and beyond the Jewish community. Our thoughts are with him, following the death of his beloved and devoted partner of many years, Jim Cummings, *alav ha-shalom*.

Lionel was ordained in 1958, 9 years before homosexuality ceased to be illegal in Britain, and 14 years before the Jewish Gay Group, as it was called then, was founded in 1972. And there were more changes ahead: In 1987, with the arrival of a few stropky lesbians – including me – the JGG became the JGLG: the Jewish Gay *and Lesbian* group. And then, on July 9, 1989, two lesbians were ordained under the auspices of the Leo Baeck College: Rabbi Sheila Shulman and me. Since 1989, a further twelve Rainbow Rabbis have received *s'mikhah* from LBC, and four others have contributed their talents, who were ordained elsewhere. That's **19** so far – **over 20% of the combined Liberal and Reform rabbinate!**

At this special service of celebration, it seems fitting to do a rabbinic roll-call. So, in chronological order, the LBC ordinands — Rabbis:

Lionel Blue (1958)

Sheila Shulman (1989)

Elli Tikvah Sarah (1989)

Indigo Jonah Raphael [Melinda Michelson Carr] (1996)

Alex Dukhovny (1999)

Erlene Wahlhaus – *zichronah livrachah* – May her memory be for blessing (1999)

Michael Pertz (2000)

James Baaden (2001)

Irit Shillor (2002)

Shulamit Ambalu (2004)

Judith Levitt (2009)

David Mitchell (2009)

Judith Rosen-Berry (2009)

Anna Gerrard (2011)

And – as of 10 days' time: Rene Pfertzel (2014) – *Mazzal tov!*

And those who were ordained elsewhere, Rabbis:

Mark Solomon

Roderick Young

Ariel Friedlander

And Hillel Athias-Robles, who is now in New York

I think we all deserve a huge *Mazzal tov!*

Of course, reciting this list of Rainbow Rabbis makes us aware of a name that is missing: Andreas Hinz, who was cruelly murdered at the end of his second year at LBC, and was due to have been ordained in 2005. As Andy remains in our hearts, we say *zichrono livrachah* – May his memory be for blessing.

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To appreciate the significance of 1989 as a milestone, some additional facts: At the rabbinic programme interviews in 1984, Sheila and I were given two psychological assessments apiece – other applicants, just one – and were then put on probation for the entire five years, rather than the usual one year. We were told that we could be asked to leave at any time if there was a ‘problem’. When we enquired about what sort of ‘problem’, we were told that no one knew because the situation was ‘unprecedented’.

There were some superb rabbis and laypeople, who supported us, but it was a strain – to say the least ... And even after receiving *s'mikhah*, the Reform Assembly of Rabbis held a day-long meeting to discuss whether or not to admit us as members – usually an automatic process for any rabbi taking a position in a Reform congregation. Fortunately, the vote went our way.

So, Sheila became Rabbi of *Beit Klal Yisrael*, the synagogue she co-founded, which has been a beacon of inclusivity in the Jewish community over the past 25 years. Meanwhile, I became Rabbi of the mainstream Reform synagogue that I had served in my 5<sup>th</sup> year. I'm not going to recite the litany of prejudice and persecution I have experienced – which included a small group lobbying to oust me from my first congregation. The reality is that most of the congregants I have encountered over the years have been open – and many of those who were initially sceptical and fearful changed their attitudes.

The lowest point came in the autumn of 1996. Director of Programmes for RSGB at that time, I spoke in my *Kol Nidrey* sermon about planning to officiate at a ‘Covenant of Love’ for two women. All I had intended to do was unpack the concept of ‘covenant’ by showing how seriously ‘marginal’ Jews took their Jewish identity. But a vocal minority were not yet ready to expand the Jewish tent.

After months of managing my job while dealing with hostility – including nasty letters – I left RSGB in July 1997. Fortunately, I found some friends while out in the cold – at Liberal Judaism’s Rabbinic Conference, Southgate Reform, Belsize Square Synagogue, and at the alternative *Beit HaChidush* congregation in Amsterdam. Then in January 1998, I visited Leicester Progressive, which I had served as a fourth year student. Six months later, they appointed me as their first part-time rabbi. On December 1, 2000, I started at Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue, and have been there ever since.

As it happens, I had first applied to BHPS in July 1997, and been rejected, without an interview. This time, the leadership decided to take a chance on me – indeed, the *Council* made the decision – rather than put it to a membership vote and risk that prejudice would prevail. Responding to their courage, I resolved to ensure that they would never have any regrets.

A handful of members left during my first year. But overall, my rabbinate has flourished at BHPS, and so has the congregation. In March 2006 when Jess and I celebrated our Civil Partnership with a *chuppah* at the *Shul*, almost half the congregation turned up.

When I applied to Leo Baeck College in 1984, I was determined that ‘Jewish life’ would include *my* Jewish life as a lesbian and a woman, and wanted to help transform Jewish teaching and practice to encompass the lives of all Jews on equal terms. There have been huge changes since 1989. LBC now practices a non-discriminatory selection process – hence the increasing numbers of LGBT rabbis. Liberal Judaism – with significant input from LGBT rabbis – published liturgy for same-sex *kiddushin*, in December 2005, to coincide with the Civil Partnership Act, and, later, supported the

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Equal Marriage campaign. More recently, LJ hosted the Heritage Lottery funded, Rainbow Jews project, co-ordinated by Surat Rathgeber Knan, and extended outreach to transgender Jews. Meanwhile, Reform Judaism has now got behind LGBT equality, and the Masorti movement is also making moves.

So, what about the United Synagogue? I took *Tikvah*, 'Hope', as my middle name because I am ever-hopeful! Shortly after he was inaugurated into office in 1991, Chief Rabbi Sacks consented to the *exclusion* of the Jewish Gay and Lesbian Helpline from a Jewish community 'walkabout' that was supposed to signal his '*inclusive*' approach... Will Chief Rabbi Mirvis take a new lead? Only time will tell... The fact is that even within the progressive movements a gap remains between *inclusive policies* and changes in *practice* on the level of individual congregations. So, we're not there yet...

But quite apart from what *others* should be doing, *we* also have work to do as Rainbow Jews to build on the Rainbow Jews project that involved so many of us, and to include those who identify as bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex. We should be proud of our achievements and our heritage as LGBTQI Jews. Now is the time to give thanks for the journey we have taken so far, as we prepare for the journey ahead:

*Barukh Attah, Adonai, Eloheynu Melekh ha-olam, shehecheyyanu, v'kiy'manu, v'higi'anu laz'man ha-zeh.*

Blessed are you, Eternal One our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has kept us alive, and supported us, and enabled us to reach this time.

And let us say: Amen.

Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah  
Pride *Chavurah Erev Shabbat* Service  
West London Synagogue  
27<sup>th</sup> June 2014 – 30<sup>th</sup> Sivan 5774