

The Challenge of Inclusion

Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah

In 1984, when as an unaffiliated Jew, I entered the Leo Baeck College to study for the rabbinate, being a lesbian was considered a problem, and so I was put on probation for the entire five-year programme, and told that I could be 'asked to leave' at any time.

During those five years, a handful of Reform rabbis and congregations reached out to me, so initially I became part of the Reform movement. How much has changed in 30 years! Towards the end of the 1990s, Reform Judaism lost its way and Liberal Judaism became more inclusive, and since 2000, Liberal Judaism has led the way in welcoming lesbian and gay individuals and couples. Having supported Civil Partnership in 2005, in recent years, Liberal Judaism got fully behind the Equal Marriage campaign and has also provided a base for a ground-breaking project on 'Rainbow Jews.' Latterly, Reform Judaism has been catching up.

The inclusion of lesbian and gay Jews is an expression of Liberal Judaism's long-held principles of justice and equality. Translating principles into practice is very challenging. As increasing numbers of Jews come out as transgender, with some choosing to transition from male to female or from female to male, Liberal Judaism will be challenged once more to act on our principles. This will involve changing our language and the way we use pronouns, and will also have very practical consequences – like synagogues providing toilet facilities that allow for non-gendered choices, for example.

There are also other implications for the practice of Liberal Judaism. The number of mixed faith households has already seen a steep rise in the past 30 years. Since LGBT Jews form a minority within a minority – between 5% and 10% of all populations – the pool of LGBT Jews being small, a disproportionate number of LGBT Jews form partnerships with non-Jews. The increasing numbers of mixed faith couples of all genders wishing to marry under Liberal Judaism auspices and celebrate their marriage with Jewish symbols and rituals also presents a challenge. So, given our commitment to inclusivity, we need to ask ourselves: Are there any limits to the practice of inclusion within Liberal Judaism? And, if there are limits, where – and why – do we think Liberal Judaism should draw the line?