EDITORIAL

The last time I saw Sheila Shulman z'l was in her hospital bed, our conversation frequently interrupted by nursing interventions and closed curtains. It brought back memories of another last encounter with an exceptional and gifted woman who had similarly played a significant role at Leo Baeck College, Dr Ellen Littmann, the college's lecturer in Bible studies since its inception. Though miles apart in temperament, both shared an intellectual curiosity and integrity; the one the product of pre-war German *Bildung*, the other of New York Yiddish culture. Both were 'outsiders' struggling for recognition in a patriarchal Jewish culture; both, in their very different ways, were nurturers of their students, their spiritual children. Both managed to retain their dignity to the end amidst the indignities of a distressing terminal illness, and both were surrounded at the end by admirers and friends.

I prefer to remember Sheila in her flat, an environment beautifully captured in this issue by the reminiscences of Deborah Kahn-Harris and Judith Rosen-Berry, surrounded by books, an inevitable cigarette in her mouth.

This memorial issue opens with Rachel Adler's paper delivered at Leo Baeck College on 23 June 2014, during a day of celebration to mark twenty-five years since the ordination of Sheila Shulman and Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah, the first lesbian rabbis to graduate from the college's rabbinic programme. Sadly Sheila was too ill to participate, but we include Elizabeth's response in which she notes that she was interviewed in 1984. Their acceptance at the time was subject to considerable debate within the college and for many years was felt to be provisional, putting considerable strain on them. Yet time was ultimately on their side, as they changed from being representatives of a 'label' to becoming real and valued people in the minds and experience of the congregations that came to know them. The seeds for the possibility of acceptance of such a radical change within the UK Progressive Jewish movements can be traced back to 1976 when a group of Reform rabbis and other interested lay people came together to 'look at the problems and difficulties in the community which were apparently associated with homosexuality'. These words come from the opening of Dr Wendy Greengross z'l's booklet *Jewish and Homosexual* (undated but published in 1982 by the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain). The nervousness that surrounded the project at the time is indicated in Rabbi Tony Bayfield's introduction. 'It is uncomfortable to fly in the face of long held prejudices but on this particular issue it seems to me to be imperative that we trust experience, new knowledge and the dictates of reason and conscience and say: Judaism may have condemned homosexuals in the past

but we can no longer continue to do so. It is time to welcome our fellow Jews to the community of which they have as much right as we do to be a part.'

Having indicated this readiness to address the issue, it was nevertheless a considerable challenge to accept that lesbians or gay men might be permitted to study for the rabbinate. Leo Baeck College took the initiative, though with the same warning that had been applied earlier to women applicants, that it could not guarantee that they would find employment on graduation! At a subsequent discussion in a special joint meeting of the rabbinic bodies of the Reform and Liberal movements no formal vote on the subject was taken, but a minute indicated that, provided other criteria for ordination were present, homosexuality per se should not prevent someone from being accepted on the programme. Ten years later, the college ran a series of evening lectures within the 'Judaism and Psychotherapy' programme on the subject of attitudes to sexuality, an expanded version of which was published as *Jewish Explorations of Sexuality*,¹ including chapters by Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah² and Sheila Shulman.³ The chapter in that volume by Lionel Blue called 'Godly and Gay' was groundbreaking: it reversed conventional assumptions by asking what religious insights and values gays could offer to 'straight' society.⁴

The section on 'Perspectives' in this issue, with contributions from Shulamit Ambalu, Janet Burden, Robin Podolsky and Mark Solomon, indicates the considerable changes in the acknowledgement, recognition and acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people in the intervening decades, and the long way still to go.

Under 'Dedications' we include articles by four current or former teachers at Leo Baeck College who wished to mark the passing of Sheila Shulman by offering an article from their own field, areas with which Sheila herself was engaged: Laliv Clenman writes on Talmudic thought; Jeremy Schonfield on interfaith and intercultural dialogue; Victor Jeleniewski Seidler on contemporary philosophy; and Joanna Weinberg on Midrash.

The last section, introduced by Janet Burden, Sheila's literary executor, includes two important papers and extracts from her last sermon as rabbi at Finchley Reform Synagogue. Four poems show something of her rebelliousness and rugged independence; two reflect the sensitivity and tenderness that those who were close to her will always remember.

With this issue sadly we mark the retirement of two long-standing members of the Editorial Board, Evelyn Friedlander and Ruth Fainlight. Evelyn, our book review editor, was the mainstay of the journal during its early years. Even before the time that her late husband Rabbi Albert Friedlander became editor, Evelyn solicited subscriptions, posted out individual copies, stored back issues in their flat and generally ensured the continued existence of the journal. A scholar in her own right, Evelyn studied the Jewish life and culture of small, pre-war, village synagogues in Germany, mounting exhibitions under

the auspices of the Hidden Legacy Foundation. From 2004 until 2015 she was the chair of the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust and director of its museum. In 1981 she edited an issue of the journal that offered women's perspectives on the contemporary European Jewish context. On the same page as her editorial was a poem, 'Miriam's Well', by Ruth Fainlight, who succeeded Edouard Roditi as poetry editor in 1992. Ruth is a poet, writer, translator and opera librettist whose collections of poems, starting with 'Cages' in 1966, have covered five decades, her most recent being *New and Collected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books, 2010). *European Judaism* is not a conventional outlet for poetry but Ruth's network of fellow poets and the respect in which she is held by them have ensured that the journal has managed to maintain this special feature. A remark she once made about the process of creating a poem works equally well for the production of a journal like *European Judaism*: 'Like every other living organism, its development is a unique combination of unassailable laws and the entirely unexpected'.

Jonathan Magonet

Notes

1. *Jewish Explorations of Sexuality*, ed. Jonathan Magonet, Providence and Oxford 1995.
2. Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah, 'Judaism and Lesbianism: A Tale of Life on the Margins of the Text', in Magonet, ed., *Jewish Explorations of Sexuality*, 95–102.
3. Sheila Shulman, 'What is our Love?', in Magonet, ed., *Jewish Explorations of Sexuality*, 103–15.
4. Lionel Blue, 'Godly and Gay', in Magonet, ed., *Jewish Explorations of Sexuality*, 117–31.

Rabbi Sheila Shulman z'l
18 October 1936 – 25 October 2014