

Jewish and LGBT+

Figures past and present

לו שר בנו עמרם פני דודי
ויפי קנצותיו והוד יפיו
מתאדמים העת שתות שכר
לא חק בתורתו ואת זכר

“Had Moses seen how my friend’s face
blushes when he is drunk, and his
beautiful curls and wonderful hands, he
would not have written in his Torah: do
not lie with a man.”

**Yehuda Alharizi, 12th century
Sephardi poet**

Kalonymus ben Kalonymus ben Meir (1286–1328)

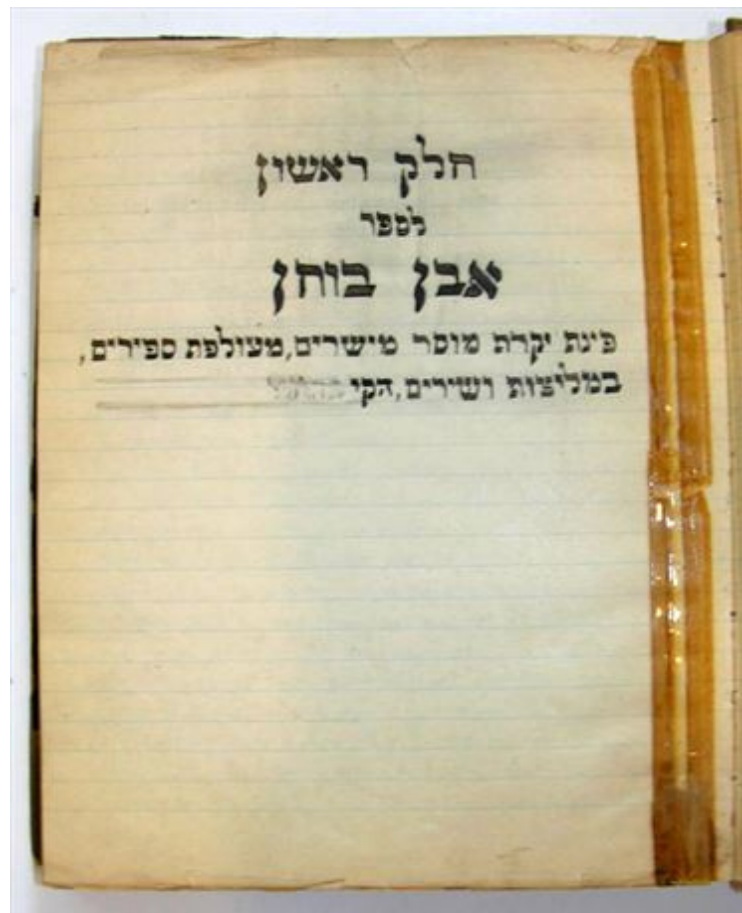


Kalonymous was a philosopher in what is now Provence, France.

He studied philosophy and medicine, and he was known for his writing and translations, starting his career as a writer at the age of twenty.

His poem Even Bohan, where he expresses his desire to have been born as a girl instead of boy, is the subject of many modern discussions about gender.

While it is impossible to know the the gender identity of someone in the 13th century, LGBTQ+ Jews have found meaning in this text, suggesting that Kalonymous may have been a transgender or gender non-conforming person in Jewish history.



Source: B'nai Jeshurun

Betty Berzon (1928–2006, she/her)

Betty was one of the first psychotherapists to treat gay and lesbians at a time when homosexuality was still classified as a disease by the American Psychological Association.

Berzon herself came out as a lesbian at a conference called “Homosexual in America” at the age of 40, becoming the first psychotherapist in America who was openly gay. She wrote multiple books during her lifetime. Her book *Permanent Partners: Building Gay and Lesbian Relationships* is thought to be a manual for same-sex couples and was revolutionary for its time.



Source: B'nai Jeshurun

She and her partner, Terry DeCrescenzo, fought discrimination as members of the Los Angeles gay community for 29 years until Berzon passed away from cancer at the age of 78. The hospital only had options for “single, married, and divorced,” on their forms and when it was clear that none of these options applied to Berzon and DeCrescenzo’s relationship, the box for “domestic partner” was added to hospital admissions forms in 2001.

Gad Beck

(1923-2012)

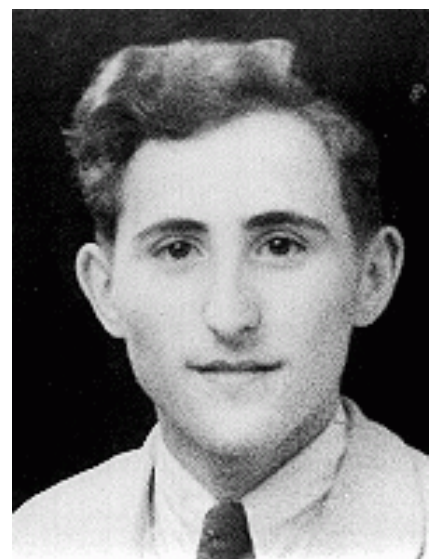


Gad grew up in Berlin. His father was a Jewish immigrant from Austria. Gad's mother had converted to Judaism.

The Becks lived in a poor section of Berlin, populated predominantly by Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe. When Gad and his twin sister, Miriam, were 5, the Becks moved to the Weissensee district of Berlin, where Gad entered primary school.

Gad was just 10 when the Nazis came to power. As one of a small number of Jewish pupils in his school, he quickly became the target of antisemitic comments. In 1934 Gad's parents enrolled him in a Jewish school, but he had to quit school when he was 12 as they could no longer afford the tuition.

As the child of a mixed marriage [Mischlinge], Gad was not deported to the east when other German Jews were. He remained in Berlin where he became involved in the underground, helping Jews to escape to Switzerland. As a gay man, he was able to turn to his trusted non-Jewish, gay acquaintances to help supply food and hiding places. In early 1945 a Jewish spy for the Gestapo betrayed Gad and a number of his underground friends. He was interned in a Jewish transit camp in Berlin. He survived this and was liberated by the Soviet army. After the war, he helped Jewish Holocaust survivors emigrate to Palestine.



Source: United States Holocaust Museum



Rabbi Stacy Offner (she/her)

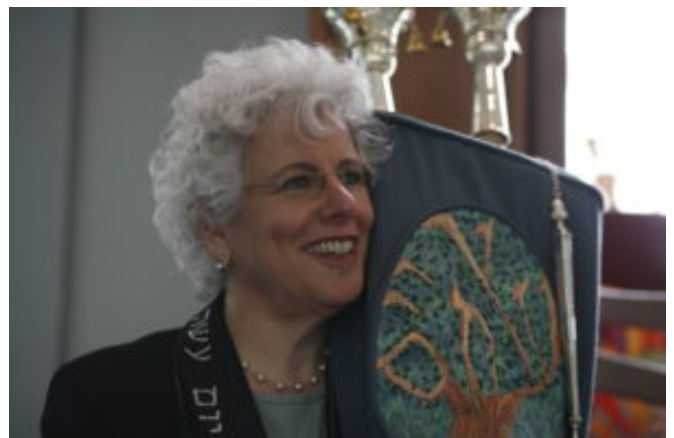
Rabbi Offner was the first rabbi history to be hired as an openly lesbian rabbi by a mainstream congregation (Shir Tikvah, Minneapolis) in 1988.

In 2008, she went on to become the 1st openly lesbian Vice President of the Union for Reform Judaism in NYC.

Offner then returned to the pulpit and has recently retired from serving as rabbi of Temple Beth Tikvah in Madison, Connecticut.

Rabbi Offner grew up in Great Neck, New York, in a Jewish family. She participated in youth groups, and by her junior year of high school, she realised that she wanted to be a rabbi.

Despite having few female rabbinic role models, it was not her gender that felt like a hurdle towards joining the rabbinate, but her sexuality. She confided in a friend during summer camp, and the friend encouraged her to move forward with her journey towards becoming a rabbi, saying, “What good does it do the Jewish faith for sincerely dedicated and concerned people like yourself to be alienated because of a Neanderthal attitude towards Lesbianism?”



Source: B'nai Jeshurun

Dr. Fritz Klein (1932-2006, he/him)



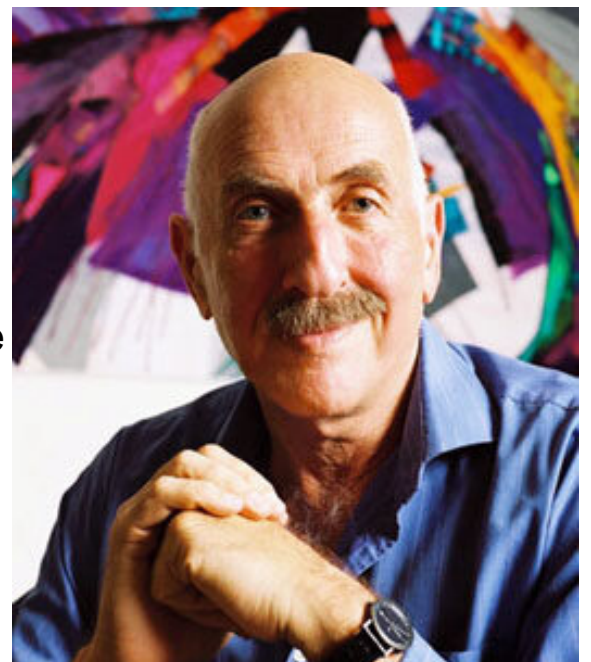
Dr Klein paved the way for research on bisexuality. Klein grew up in Vienna and was raised in an Orthodox family, moving to New York in 1932 to escape antisemitism in Austria.

After becoming a doctor in 1961, he saw there was a gap in research on bisexuality, and he placed an ad in the Village Voice. This was the start of the Bisexual Forum, which became the first support group for bisexual people.

Dr. Klein is best known for the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid, meant to be a more complex version of the Kinsey Scale, as Klein recognized that sexuality is complex and multifaceted. Using his own metrics, he described his sexuality as bi-gay.

In 1998, Dr. Klein founded the American Institute of Bisexuality (AIB), a non-profit organization that funds research and education on bisexuality. He also founded the Journal of Bisexuality, a journal devoted to the study of bisexuality.

Until his passing in 2006, Klein was Chairman of the Board of the AIB and donated his body to science.



Source: B'nai Jeshurun



Rabbi Sandra Lawson (she/her)

Rabbi Sandra was ordained as a rabbi in 2018, becoming the first openly gay, Black, female rabbi in the world.

Raised in a non-practicing Christian family, Rabbi Lawson came out as a lesbian in college and realized that Christianity was not a fit for her.

During college she served in the military, working in child abuse and domestic violence cases and eventually receiving her degree in sociology. When she began a career in personal training, she connected with client Rabbi Joshua Lesser and found comfort in his synagogue, calling it a “safe place to be queer.”

This led her to convert to Judaism and ultimately receive her ordination at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Rabbi Lawson was hired at Elon University in 2018 as the Hillel rabbi and the associate chaplain for Jewish life, and was appointed in 2021 as the Inaugural Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Reconstructing Judaism.



She is currently a sought-after speaker and uses social media to reach a wide audience to teach about inclusion, Judaism, and activism.

In 2020, she was named as one of the Forward 50: Remarkable American Jews in a Remarkable Year.

Leslie Feinberg (1949-2014, ze/hir)



Leslie was a lesbian and transgender activist whose books brought the stories and terminology of gender nonconforming folks to the forefront.

Feinberg grew up in Buffalo, New York in a working-class family that did not accept hir sexual orientation. In hir twenties, Feinberg found queer community and activism, joining a socialist group in Buffalo.

After over two decades of writing, Feinberg's first novel *Stone Butch Blues* won the Lambda Literary Award in 1993. Feinberg also wrote nonfiction books, such as *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* and *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*.

In *Transgender Warriors*, Feinberg uses the word "transgender" to describe "people who cross the cultural boundaries of gender." Feinberg used multiple sets of pronouns during hir life, saying that ze liked the gender-neutral pronouns "ze/hir" because they keep people from assuming one's sexuality or gender upon meeting a person.

Feinberg suffered from Lyme disease for many years and only received treatment later in life due to a hesitancy towards meeting with doctors who might be discriminatory towards hir as a transgender person. Ze and hir spouse, Minnie Bruce Pratt, married in 2011 and lived in Syracuse, New York, before Feinberg died of Lyme disease-related complications in 2014.

In 2019, Feinberg was one of fifty trailblazers featured on the National LGBTQ Wall of Honor at the Stonewall National Monument, the first U.S. national monument for LGBTQ+ history.



Source: B'nai Jeshurun

Abby Chava Stein (b.1991, she/her)

Abby made history as the first openly transgender woman to leave the Hasidic community.

Stein was raised in an ultra-Orthodox community in Williamsburg, Brooklyn in a family with 12 siblings, speaking Yiddish and Hebrew and attending an all-boys Jewish day school. Her family is known for being descendants of the Baal Shem Tov.

After getting married, having a child, and receiving ordination as a rabbi in 2011, Stein made the decision to leave the Hasidic community in 2012. Through the help of the non-profit organization Footsteps, she was able to find support both through her transition out of the community and through her coming out as transgender.

She enrolled at Columbia University at the age of 21. Since coming out and changing her name to Abby Chava Stein at Romemu synagogue, Stein has created a career out of writing, activism, and public speaking.



Source: B'nai Jeshurun

Her memoir, *Becoming Eve: My Journey from Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi to Transgender Woman* became a best-seller in 2019. After leaving the Hasidic community, Stein has used her own journey to help others by creating support groups for trans people coming from Orthodox backgrounds. She joined the Women's March Leadership in 2019 and was a speaker at the March in 2020. Stein uses her rabbinic background as a member of the National Center for Jewish Women's "Rabbis for Repro board" and T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights.

Harvey Milk (1930-1978, he/him)



Harvey was the first openly gay politician to be elected to a public office in the United States.

Born to Jewish Lithuanian immigrants in New York, Milk moved to San Francisco as a young man and became a prominent member of the gay community. While in San Francisco, he worked odd jobs and eventually moved to The Castro, a neighbourhood popular with other gay men and lesbians.

Frustrated with anti-gay discrimination in employment, policing, and government, Milk was motivated to run for office. After two unsuccessful attempts, he was finally elected City Supervisor of San Francisco in 1977. Milk served in this position for only eleven months, but during this time he sponsored a bill that banned discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations on the basis of sexuality.

Both Milk and the mayor at the time, George Moscone, were assassinated in 1978 by Dan White, a colleague and the only person who had opposed the bill.

Milk was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2009.



Source: B'nai Jeshurun

Despite his short life, Milk's legacy lives on.