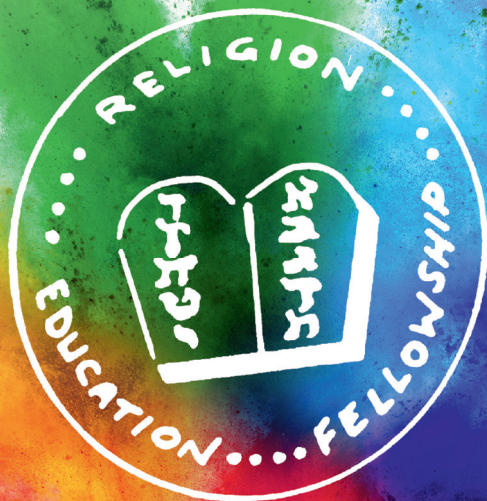


Jan Wilkens

“Jewish, Gay and Proud”

The Founding of Beth Chayim Chadashim
as a Milestone of Jewish Homosexual
Integration



BETH CHAYIM CHADASHIM

A Metropolitan Community Temple

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Bibliographic information published by the German National Library:

The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

Publication supported by the Chair of Religious Studies and Jewish Thought at the University of Potsdam and the Association for Jewish Studies in Germany (Vereinigung für Jüdische Studien).

Universitätsverlag Potsdam 2020

<http://verlag.ub.uni-potsdam.de/>
Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam
Phone.: +49 (0)331 977 2533 / Fax: -2292
Email: verlag@uni-potsdam.de

The series **Pri ha-Pardes** is edited by Rebekka Denz und Michael K. Schulz on behalf of the Association for Jewish Studies in Germany (Vereinigung für Jüdische Studien) in cooperation with the Department of Jewish Studies and Religious Studies at the University of Potsdam.

ISSN (print) 1863-7442
ISSN (online) 2191-4540

Master Thesis, University of Potsdam, 2019

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Print: docupoint GmbH Magdeburg
Layout and typesetting: bären buchsatz, Berlin
Cover design: Kristin Schettler
Cover illustration: Beth Chayim Chadashim
ISBN 978-3-86956-492-0

Simultaneously published online on the Publication Server of the University of Potsdam:

<https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-47370>

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:kobv:517-opus4-473702>

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1 Introduction

1972 represents a notable year for those Jews who felt that their sexual desires did not fulfill the norms of the heterosexual matrix. Until that year, none of the major Jewish denominations in the United States were openly welcoming to queer Jews. Jewish tradition rejects homosexuality as an abomination (*Leviticus 18:22*); male homosexual acts are considered to be punished with the death penalty in the Hebrew Bible, female acts were regarded as minor transgressions in later traditional literature. If Jews publicly expressed their differing sexual orientation, they were in most cases excluded from their congregations. Hence, several remained silent, fearing rejection or social and economic harm. Others alienated themselves from Judaism and abandoned their religious traditions. Moreover, the legal situation in the United States was challenging at the time. Consenting adult same-sex relationships were mostly illegal and homosexuality was still considered a mental disorder. However, in 1972, four Jews in Los Angeles came together and had a revolutionary idea: They wanted to establish a synagogue that reached out to the gay and lesbian community. Only a few months later, a newly founded temple, which should later be called *Beth Chayim Chadashim* (BCC), held its first Friday night and High Holiday services. The new congregation quickly organized itself and immediately reached out to the local branch of Reform Judaism. The Pacific Southwest Council of the *Union of American Hebrew Congregations* (UAHC) helped the congregation to prosper and guided them through the affiliation process with Reform Judaism. Only two years after its founding, the synagogue was accepted into the UAHC.

This instance lined up with a new social climate in the United States. The liberation of women, the sexual revolution, and the African-American civil rights movement influenced the emergence of the gay rights movement. The 1969 Stonewall Protests in New York are widely considered the beginning of the latter. However, the first organizations and protests for the rights of homosexuals were already founded in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in Los Angeles. Queer history is an integral part of the city, so it

is not surprising that BCC was also born on the West Coast and had a massive influence in the process of accepting homosexuals within the Reform Movement and even beyond. It was admitted to Reform Judaism only two years after its founding and became a milestone of Jewish homosexual integration by being the first gay and lesbian institution ever recognized by a religious mainstream organization. From there, the synagogue engaged further in the acceptance of non-heterosexual, and later non-cisgender Jews within the Jewish community.

This study examines how the founding of BCC as a gay outreach synagogue was possible in the early 1970s. I'll argue that Los Angeles was an ideal place for finding already existing paragons and supporting infrastructure. The leadership of the synagogue was dedicated and motivated to form a vivid congregation, which focused on the needs of its members, providing a safe space, and to rediscover a tradition that rejected queer Jews for what they were. They faced elementary questions like who should become a member of the congregation, how to bring Jews from different religious backgrounds together, or how gender roles needed to be challenged especially in a gay outreach synagogue. For most of the temple's members, it was the first time to merge their two shared identities as Jews and homosexuals. They realized that the joining of those two identities was not an impossible endeavor. The future vice-president of the temple, Rick Block, put this feeling in the following words: "Now I think of myself as Jewish, gay and proud."¹ These three words – Jewish, gay and proud – became the slogan of the newborn synagogue.²

While bringing their own congregation together, the leadership spread out and asked for support among the local Jewish community. They decided to approach Reform Judaism and gained many supporters there. These supporters were crucial for the integration of the synagogue into Reform Judaism's framework. BCC's desired membership caused an

¹ Sarff, Douglas (1975): "Los Angeles Temple: Jewish, Gay and Proud" (reprint from NewsWest October 2, 1975), in: *Beth Chayim Chadashim Newsletter*. Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 10–11, p. 11.

² Cf. Anonymous (1976): "Palm Springs Report," in: *Beth Chayim Chadashim Newsletter*. Vol. 4, No. 5, p. 11.

intensive debate among lay and rabbinical leaders, the first widely circulating debate on homosexuality in 20th century Judaism. This study analyzes eleven *responsa*, which discuss the issue of homosexuality and the question of whether a congregation that mostly consisted of homosexual Jews could join the UAHC and therefore Reform Judaism. These *responsa* are from renowned rabbis, an ad hoc committee of the *Central Conference of American Rabbis* (CCAR), and two psychiatrists who expounded the temporary scientific debate on the issue. The study focuses on the first two years of BCC's existence. It shows that not only a congregation was built up in this period. Within those two years, a change in the perception of homosexuals in Reform Judaism was introduced. Pioneers from Los Angeles stimulated the discussion on how Judaism should treat their homosexual followers and paved the way for the acceptance, tolerance, and integration of alternative, non-heterosexual lifestyles in Judaism as a whole.

1.1 Sources and Literature

Queer Jewish history and queer identities in Judaism are fairly new topics in academia. The first widely published engagement with this issue, even less academic, was *Twice Blessed*, an anthology of essays by mainly homo- and bisexual Jews by Christie Balka and Andy Rose.³ For the first time, Jews wrote about their two identities of being Jewish and queer. They wrote about their experiences, models of “queer Jewish lives,” and community workers presented outlines for Jewish educational work on homosexuality. Building on this concept, David Shneer and Caryn Aviv published *Queer Jews* in 2002.⁴ This work also reflects the progress that had been achieved in the past decade. Both works have a clear focus on an exchange of experiences and the visualization of queer perspectives in Judaism. In 2004, Steven Greenberg's *Wrestling with God and Men* was the first voice to discuss how to bring together an Orthodox way of life and a gay identity.⁵

³ Cf. Balka, Christie; Rose, Andy (eds) (1989): *Twice Blessed. On Being Lesbian, Gay, and Jewish*. Boston.

⁴ Cf. Shneer, David; Aviv, Caryn (eds) (2002): *Queer Jews*. New York, London.

⁵ Cf. Greenberg, Steven (2004): *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition*. Madison.

Together with the interpretations of the *parashot* in *Torah Queeries* (2009),⁶ these works are the most important references on a religious approach to the topic of LGBTQ and Judaism. But all of these studies don't, or only in small parts, reflect BCC and its groundbreaking work.

In its first step, this study explains the preconditions of the founding of the first gay outreach synagogue. C. Todd White in *Pre-Gay L.A.*⁷ and Ricardo L. Ortiz' entry in the *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in America* on Los Angeles,⁸ I'll examine Los Angeles' unique gay history and argue that "queerness" is an integral part of the city. The influence of Los Angeles' multicultural environment, its openness for different lifestyles, and the influence of the tolerant film industry on the Jewish community will also be considered, especially through Karen Wilson's anthology, which observes L.A.'s Jewry from various historical, cultural, and economic perspectives.⁹ General changes in American Judaism¹⁰ fostered an open climate for changes towards homosexual Jews as well as parallel developments in Christian communities, namely the *Metropolitan Community Church (MCC)*.¹¹ In the following step, this study reconstructs

⁶ Cf. Drinkwater, Gregg; Lesser, Joshua; Shneer, David (eds) (2009): *Torah Queeries. Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible*. New York, London.

⁷ Cf. White, C. Todd (2009): *Pre-Gay L.A. A Social History of the Movement for Homosexual Rights*. Urbana, Chicago.

⁸ Cf. Ortiz, Ricardo L. (2004): "Los Angeles and West Hollywood," in: *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in America*. 2, H. D. to *Queer Theory*, ed. by Marc Stein (editor in chief). New York, Detroit, San Diego et al., pp. 206–210.

⁹ Cf. Wilson, Karen S. (eds) (2013): *Jews in the Los Angeles Mosaic*. Los Angeles, Berkeley, London.

¹⁰ These changes can be traced back through the outstanding work in Wertheimer, Jack (2018): *The American Judaism. How Jews Practice Their Religion Today*. Princeton, Oxford, as well as through the intensive research of Dana Evan Kaplan throughout the 2000s (cf. Kaplan, Dana Evan (2003): *American Reform Judaism. An Introduction*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, London, and id. (2009): *Contemporary American Judaism. Transformation and Renewal*. New York).

¹¹ Heather Rachele White briefly but persuasively examines the early stages in Christian LGBT religious organizing (cf. White, Heather Rachele (2008): "Proclaiming Liberation: The Historical Roots of LGBT Religious Organizing, 1946–1976," in: *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*. Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 102–119). The history and influence of the *Metropolitan Community Church* will be reconstructed by the testimonials of its founder Troy Perry (cf. Perry, Troy: Interview with Andy Sacher (The Lavender Effect). March 9, 2014 [Unpublished Transcript, courtesy of Andy Sacher], and Perry, Troy D.; Swicegood, Thomas L. P. (1990): *Don't Be Afraid*

the early days of BCC. What were the challenges in creating a synagogue which had never been seen before? How did the synagogue gain supporters? How did the leadership approach Reform Judaism? These questions are addressed through the temple's archives, which are located at the *ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives* at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. This study uses general documents, meeting minutes, service material, correspondence, clippings, and the temple's newsletter as historical accounts. The documents are only receivable on site and contain over thirty boxes. They trace the synagogue's history from 1972 to 2013 and only the financial records are affected by restricted access. In addition to these documents, the thesis draws on the intensive work of BCC's member Stephen J. Sass, who recorded the synagogue's history for the first time.¹² However, his work tracks only the major events in the congregation's history and contains some inconsistencies that this thesis tries to correct. Sylvia Sukop, another BCC member, also looked at certain aspects of the temple's history and published two important articles regarding BCC as an L. A. phenomenon¹³ and, most recently, regarding the history of the temple's first Torah scroll.¹⁴ The most intense work on gay outreach synagogues has been done by sociologist Moshe Shokeid. He accompanied *Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (CBST)* in New York, the largest LGBTQ synagogue in the United States, for over two decades. Besides CBST's history, he focuses on reasons for joining a gay synagogue, as well as on the interaction of the terms "homosexuality," "spirituality," and "Judaism."¹⁵ His conclusions are primarily of sociological nature and are occasionally used as a reference point in this study. Amy Hertz addresses the integration of homosexuals into Reform Judaism in her extensive rabbinical

Anymore. The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches. New York).

¹² Cf. Sass, Stephen J. (2002): "Our History," in: *Beth Chayim Chadashim. Celebrating 30 Years, 1972–2002.* Los Angeles, pp. 5–18.

¹³ Cf. Sukop, Sylvia (2015): "Pioneers of the Frontier of Faith," in: *L.A.itudes. An Angeleno's Atlas*, ed. by Patricia Wakida. Berkeley, pp. 117–127.

¹⁴ Cf. id. (2019): "Holding on to history and each other: The unexpected LGBTQ legacy of a Czech Holocaust survivor and a Torah scroll from her hometown," in: *Journal of Lesbian Studies.* Vol. 23, Issue 1, pp. 52–67.

¹⁵ Most notably in Shokeid, Moshe (2003): *A Gay Synagogue in New York.* Philadelphia.

thesis.¹⁶ There, she argues with the three major steps of this progress: the acceptance of gay outreach synagogues by means of BCC, the acceptance of gay and lesbian applicants to the rabbinate, and the approval of same-sex marriages. She retraces BCC's history, mostly with the help of Sass' achievements, and reflects the discussions on BCC in the Reform Movement. She uses BCC in its entirety as an example underlying her argument on homosexual integration. Thus, this thesis will argue that the impetus for Jewish homosexual integration came from Los Angeles, from BCC, and their supporters. With regard to the already mentioned *responsa* literature, Hertz only considers a small number of the existing documents, whether out of a lack of knowledge about others or a lack of relevance for her argument. The *responsa* literature is accessible through the summer edition of the *CCAR Journal* in 1973 or through the *American Jewish Archives* in Cincinnati. In the following, the arguments of opponents and proponents for the admission of a gay outreach congregation, i. e. BCC, into the UAHC will be presented.

1.2 Terminologies: Homophile, Homosexual, Gay Outreach, LGBT(Q), Queer Synagogues

There exist various terms for synagogues like BCC in both primary sources and secondary literature: homophile, homosexual, gay outreach, LGBT(Q) or queer synagogue. These terms are not used consistently and reflect the prevailing contemporary debates on LGBTQ issues. From 1951 to 1970, the homophile movement flourished in the United States. The movement consisted mainly of white gay men and lesbians of the middle class, who came from different backgrounds and from across the political spectrum. Its members challenged discrimination against homosexuals in various areas of daily life. The movement's leaders preferred the term "homophile," deriving from Greek and meaning "loving the same." They thought that the term, compared to homosexuality, shifted the emphasis away from

¹⁶ Cf. Hertz, Amy Beth (2008): *One in Every Minyan: Homosexuality and the Reform Movement*. Cincinnati.

sex towards loving relationships of the same sex.¹⁷ During the 1970s, the term was questioned and replaced, since activists and scholars of the gay liberation movement thought that their precursors were “conservative and that they felt a degree of shame about the sex lives of homosexuals.”¹⁸ In the first months of its existence, BCC called itself a congregation for the homophile community.¹⁹ But already in November 1972, the Steering Committee decided to use the word “homosexual” instead of “homophile.”²⁰ A few years later, the congregation gradually changed its own description from “homosexual” to “gay” and then to “gay and lesbian synagogue.”²¹ However, the UAHC insisted that synagogues like BCC should not be labeled as gay or lesbian because this would imply that they were exclusively for homosexuals. The UAHC preferred the term “special outreach synagogues,”²² i.e. gay outreach synagogues. Since this term was accepted by BCC and its sister synagogues, it will be used in this thesis to describe the phenomenon in the 1970s, while being well aware that other kinds of sexual orientations and identities may have been included in the congregations themselves but not in their self-description. It was not until the 1990s that BCC officially added “bisexual” to their outreach’s list and the term “transgender” followed at the end of 1999.²³ Therefore, it’s only possible to properly speak about LGBT/GLBT or queer (an inter-changeable term that includes more identities, however)²⁴ synagogues from the

¹⁷ Cf. Meeker, Martin (2004): “Homophile Movement,” in: *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in America. 2, H. D. to Queer Theory*, ed. by Marc Stein (editor in chief). New York, Detroit, San Diego et al., pp. 52–56, pp. 52–53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁹ Cf. University of Southern California, USC Libraries, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Beth Chayim Chadashim Records, Collection 2012–133 (further BCCR), Box 30, Folder 1, Invitation First High Holiday Services.

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 2, Steering Committee Meeting November 6, 1972.

²¹ Cf. Edwards, Lisa (2001): “Why I Choose to Be a Rabbi at a GLBT Synagogue,” in: *Lesbian Rabbis. The First Generation*, ed. by Rebecca T. Alpert, Sue Levi Elwell and Shirley Idelson. New Brunswick, New Jersey, London, pp. 152–160, p. 159.

²² Cf. Kaplan, 2003, p. 213.

²³ Cf. Edwards, 2001, p. 159.

²⁴ I’ll use the word “queer” when making more general statements on non-heterosexual, non-cisgender people. Even though the community was not totally aware, I cannot assume that there were not people with other sexual orientations and sexual identities among those who were called “homosexuals.” However, I cannot use the word “queer”

2000s on. BCC currently uses those terms with an additional emphasis on their heterosexual friends. Hence, BCC's senior rabbi Lisa Edwards recently used the abbreviation "LGBTQS" ("S" for straight allies) to define the synagogue²⁵ – a term that BCC's founders certainly did not have in mind when they founded the temple in 1972.

to describe certain movements or debates that addressed "homosexuals" or "homosexuality." At the time, the term either included everybody who was not located within the heterosexual matrix or simply manifested the unconsciousness or unawareness respectively of other sexualities and identities.

²⁵ Cf. Edwards, Lisa (2018): "Tradition! Transition!," in: *A Life of Meaning, Embracing Reform Judaism's Sacred Path*, ed. by Dana Evan Kaplan. New York, pp. 395–402, p. 396.

2 Influences on the Founding of *Beth Chayim Chadashim*

This chapter addresses how it was possible to establish a gay outreach synagogue at the beginning of the 1970s and why Los Angeles was the ideal place for this endeavor. The reason for BCC becoming so successful in creating a community and being accepted by a mainstream religious organization has a lot to do with the specific situation in Los Angeles and with changes in American synagogues in general. I will argue that four main premises fostered a new cultural, social, and political climate which enabled new ideas and an openness for religious innovation: Firstly, Los Angeles was the birthplace of the homophile movement. The city has a rich queer history and the first organizations fighting for the rights of homosexuals were founded here. Jews in Los Angeles could not remain unaffected by this social revolution. Secondly, Jewish Angelenos created their own, unique identity in the multicultural environment of the city. They were, generally speaking, far more open and tolerant than their counterparts on the East Coast. The West Coast became a hub of Jewish-religious innovation. Thirdly, general changes in the religious landscape in the United States took place after World War II and American Jews created alternatives to the traditional top-down governed synagogue. Additionally, the feminist movement had a huge impact on Jewish-religious life, for instance, with the ordination of women as rabbis or cantors. And fourthly, BCC is not conceivable without the *Metropolitan Community Church (MCC)*, the first widely spread religious institution addressing the spiritual needs of gays and lesbians.

2.1 Los Angeles and the Homophile Movement

Homosexual acts between adults were forbidden in California until the Brown-Moscone bill in 1975.²⁶ Despite the permanent threat of investi-

²⁶ Cf. Eskridge, William N. (2008): *Dishonorable Passions. Sodomy Laws in America, 1861–2003*. New York, Toronto, London et al., pp. 197–201.

gation by the Los Angeles Police Department and public denunciation, Los Angeles became the “birthplace of the modern homosexual rights movement.”²⁷ Jim Kepner even ascribes L. A. a rich gay “prehistory.” Bunker Hill, for instance, had been considered a gay neighborhood at least since 1848.²⁸ Los Angeles was regarded as a “haven for queer people” from its early beginnings and “queer culture is part of the city’s DNA,”²⁹ thanks to its independent spirit and sense of freedom.³⁰ LGBTQ were present from an early point of time and were tolerated in the emerging Hollywood film industry. The embrace of self-expression, creativity, and the migration of Europeans with more liberal visions made L. A. a cultural capital where all sexual orientations and identities were accepted.³¹ However, LGBTQ had to remain silent about their sexual identities, even though the Hollywood community openly supported queer establishments from the 1930s on.³² Until the early 1960s, Hollywood remained deeply closeted but very welcoming for LGBTQ.³³

During the 1930s, L. A. demonstrated a “relative sexual and political tolerance”³⁴ which attracted many popular gay figures like author Christopher Isherwood. After World War II, Evelyn Hooker started her groundbreaking work at the University of California, Los Angeles which proved for the first time that gay men were just as mentally and socially adjusted as heterosexuals and hence homosexuality could not be considered a mental illness.³⁵

In 1947, “Lisa Ben” (pseudonym of – Edythe Eyde) produced the first regularly distributed, homosexual-themed publication in the United States.³⁶ *Vice Versa – America’s Gayest Magazine* circulated among her friends

²⁷ White, C. Todd, 2009, p. 8.

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁹ Roots of Equality; De Simone, Tom; Wang, Teresa et al. (2011): *Images of America. Lavender Los Angeles*. Charleston, p. 11.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 25.

³² Cf. Oritz, 2004, p. 206.

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 207.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁶ Cf. White, C. Todd, 2009, p. 1.

and, therefore, only had a limited audience. The magazine's themes were play and film reviews, literature, and a social commentary ("Queer as It Seems").³⁷ Despite being one of the first instances of openly female-lesbian public writing, Lisa Ben discontinued the publication of her magazine in 1948 for personal reasons.³⁸ At the same time, a gay male subculture emerged in different neighborhoods, most importantly in Downtown L. A., Hollywood, and Santa Monica.³⁹

1950 was a significant year for the homophile movement. Five gay men lead by Harry Hay, often referred to as the "father of the gay rights movement,"⁴⁰ started planning a social activist organization in November. After gaining more members, the *Mattachine*⁴¹ was officially founded on July 20, 1951, in order to unify homosexuals, educate both homosexuals and heterosexuals on human sexuality, and provide leadership for those who were excluded on the grounds of their sexual orientation.⁴² *Mattachine* is "often credited with inaugurating the modern U.S. LGBT political movement"⁴³ since it was the first of its kind to (cautiously) address political goals in public. But from its early days on, a dispute delineated between Harry Hay and co-founder Dale Jennings. The latter could not agree on Hay's notion that homosexuals were a cultural minority and 'a people' which had to be unified.⁴⁴ Jennings wanted integration into the heterosexual society, Hay a separated subgroup.⁴⁵ The tensions between the two led to a separation and into the founding of *ONE, Inc.* in 1952 by Jennings and others. The sustaining idea for this new organization was the attempt to establish a publication on homosexuality. Only one year later, the first issue of *ONE*

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁹ Cf. Oritz, 2004, pp. 206–207.

⁴⁰ White, C. Todd, 2009, p. 11.

⁴¹ In the early days, the members called themselves the "Society of Fools." The name *Mattachine* was brought up by Harry Hay and stems from *Société Mattachine*, a French fraternity group in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Their members, young bachelors, met in secret for dances and other rituals (cf. Faderman, Lillian (2015): *The Gay Revolution. The Story of the Struggle*. New York, London, Toronto et al., p. 59).

⁴² Cf. White, C. Todd, 2009, p. 18.

⁴³ Oritz, 2004, p. 207.

⁴⁴ Cf. White, C. Todd, 2009, p. 19.

⁴⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

Magazine was published with Jennings as editor in chief. The magazine achieved higher visibility in and outside the gay community and “became the first official voice of America’s homosexual movement.”⁴⁶ While *Mat-tachine* was mostly male-led, *ONE*’s staff was co-gendered and included several female-lesbian voices.⁴⁷ In addition to the magazine, from 1956 on, the *ONE Institute for Homophile Studies* organized conferences with speakers from various disciplines on homosexuality⁴⁸ and offered courses of study throughout the year.⁴⁹ But during the 1960s, *ONE, Inc.* experienced serious fragmentation into several different new organizations (e.g. the *Homosexual Information Center*) and publications (e.g. *Tangents* or *The Ladder*) and could only survive thanks to a generous donor.⁵⁰ *ONE Magazine*’s status as the most important publication for homosexual issues was inherited by *The Advocate*, founded in Los Angeles as a newsletter in 1967 by two members of the activist group *Personal Rights in Defense and Education (PRIDE)* in response to a police raid on a black gay bar.⁵¹ The newsletter quickly developed to a magazine that became a national publication and is distributed to this day.

In 1959, ten years before the Stonewall riots in New York, the “perhaps first homosexual uprising in the world”⁵² took place in Downtown L. A. At Cooper’s Doughnuts, located between gay bars, many LGBTQ came to get coffee or to find sexual encounters. Hence, the Los Angeles Police Department, then known for its rigid policy against homosexuals, often patrolled in front of the shop.⁵³ One night in May 1959, the police entered the shop and required – as usual – identification from the customers. They singled out three of them and ordered them into their squad car. However, the customers

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

⁴⁷ Cf. Oritz, 2004, p. 207.

⁴⁸ In fact, *ONE* sponsored the first Midwinter Institute in 1955. After its unexpected success, *ONE, Inc.* decided to create an institution for annual conferences and further education about homosexuality (cf. White, C. Todd, 2009, p. 73).

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 73–74.

⁵⁰ Cf. Oritz, 2004, p. 207.

⁵¹ Cf. Sukop, 2015, p. 118.

⁵² Faderman, Lillian; Timmons, Stuart (2006): *Gay L. A. A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*. New York, p. 2.

⁵³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 2.

refused and the police officers fled, calling in more squad cars. Several people were arrested and the street was closed until the next morning.⁵⁴ Even though Los Angeles was the place where institutions demanding equal rights and visibility emerged, the legal climate for homosexuals remained hostile and the reality on the street was rough and unpredictable.

White argues that the modern gay rights movement could have started in any other city with a large homosexual population like New York or San Francisco. Everywhere in the country, people began to work against discrimination against homosexuals. The movement received its energy through the feminist critique, the anti-establishment feeling of the Vietnam era, and the new ethnic and group pride.⁵⁵ But in Los Angeles, people started to stand up and to take action for themselves. They were in the right place at the right time. Furthermore, certain conditions specific to L.A. were equally helpful: the overall tolerance for different lifestyles or faiths; the open-minded film industry; the hedonistic atmosphere in the city; and the fact that California was a wealthy state in which (discreet) homosexuals could make a living, even without a supportive family. Hence, the partners of the central figures of the homophile movement could provide for full-time activism.⁵⁶

Los Angeles undoubtedly became the first hub of the modern gay rights movement, the “epicenter of the LGBT movement.”⁵⁷

2.2 Los Angeles and its Jewish Community

Los Angeles’ Jewish population always was one of the most diverse in the world. Consisting of representatives from every diaspora community and Israel, Jewish identities in Los Angeles vary in all political, religious, and social dimensions.⁵⁸ Whereas the Jewry in New York, the second center of

⁵⁴ Cf. Faderman, 2015, pp. 115–116.

⁵⁵ Cf. Cooper, Aaron (1989): “No Longer Invisible: Gay and Lesbian Jews Build a Movement,” in: *Journal of Homosexuality*. Vol. 18, Issues 3–4, pp. 83–94, p. 83.

⁵⁶ Cf. White, C. Todd, 2009, pp. 7–8.

⁵⁷ Cf. *Roots of Equality*, 2011, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Cf. Wilson, Karen S. (2013): “Introduction: Jews in the Los Angeles Mosaic,” in: *Jews in the Los Angeles Mosaic*, ed. by Karen S. Wilson. Los Angeles, Berkeley, London, pp. 2–8, p. 4.

American Judaism, was dominated by the experiences of mainly Eastern European Jews within their separate communities, the Jews of Los Angeles historically constructed “lives, identities, and relationships in American [non-Jewish, A/N] society.”⁵⁹ With the geographical and cultural distance from New York, Los Angeles’ Jewry could develop its own experience. The city welcomed Jews with its cultural diversity and freedom of self-expression.⁶⁰ Jews were confronted with the city’s diversity and built up their own identities and communities while adjusting to the cultural tensions and aspirations of the city’s residents.⁶¹ In the first half of the 20th century, Los Angeles’ Jewish community concentrated in two completely different places: the Jewish working class in Boyle Heights and the new Jewish elite in Hollywood. While Los Angeles itself was admired because of its climate and location between hills and the beach, Boyle Heights attracted working-class Jews from the American East and the Midwest with its affordable housing and jobs.⁶² These immigrants were properly trained, spoke proper English, and could easily adjust to their new surroundings.⁶³ But Jews were not the only immigrants into the neighborhood. Boyle Heights was a “diverse urban environment,”⁶⁴ with an Armenian, Mexican, Russian Molokan, and a significant black community. The experiences in this environment were very different from those of the more ethnically segregated working-classes in the U.S. East.⁶⁵ Jews there had necessarily to deal with ethnical and economic tensions in the neighborhood⁶⁶ which led

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁶⁰ Cf. Sandberg, Neil C. (1986): *Jewish Life in Los Angeles. A Window to Tomorrow*. Lanham, New York, London, p. 1.

⁶¹ Cf. Wilson, 2013, p. 4.

⁶² Cf. Wilson, 2013, p. 6.

⁶³ Cf. Luce, Caroline (2013): “Reexamining Los Angeles’ ‘Lower East Side’: Jewish Bakers Union Local 453 and Yiddish Food Culture in 1920s Boyle Heights,” in: *Jews in the Los Angeles Mosaic*, ed. by Karen Wilson. Los Angeles, Berkeley, London, pp. 26–42, p. 29.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

⁶⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

⁶⁶ This led to two different developments: On the one hand, rabbis and religious leaders tried to ensure that the working-class Jews did not abandon their Jewish heritage, increased their notion on religion, and introduced charity-based support. On the other hand, Yiddishists emphasized the importance of the Yiddish language and heritage and promoted Jewish self-help mechanisms in order to “uplift” Jews by their own (cf. *ibid.*, p. 30).

to liberal visions on American society.⁶⁷ Hollywood created a new Jewish elite since Jewish immigrants succeeded in establishing their studios here. Most of them could build on their experience as theater owners on the East Coast.⁶⁸ For them, the East Coast had become a token for the old America where it had been impossible to leave their ethnicity behind.⁶⁹ In only a few years, Jews created an industry that had never been seen before and that contributed to Los Angeles' economic success. In accordance with that, the term "American Dream" was invented by Jews in Hollywood.⁷⁰ Most significantly, they did not have to identify as Jewish in Hollywood anymore. Jewish identity became a choice.⁷¹ After World War II, prosperity in Los Angeles and its surroundings grew and new possibilities became available to most of its residents. Jews and other minorities left Boyle Heights, spread out, and became developers and innovators of the city.⁷² Many of them left the city center and traditional, Orthodox communities. So, they developed a differentiated suburban lifestyle, much earlier than Jews in the rest of the country. Non-Jewish influences increased especially within suburbia.⁷³ By patronizing high and low culture and engaging in social change,⁷⁴ "Jewish Angelenos changed Los Angeles into a center of diverse American culture."⁷⁵ After being excluded from the political landscape at the beginning of the 20th century, Jews gradually achieved political influence. They did so by building multi-ethnic coalitions. For instance, the "community relations" activism of the Boyle Heights' Jewish community helped Mexican American Edward Roybal to be elected to the city council in 1949.⁷⁶ L. A.

⁶⁷ Cf. Wilson, 2013, p. 6.

⁶⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Cf. Turan, Kenneth (2013): "Letting Jews be Jews: Ethnicity and Hollywood, Its Fall and Rise," in: *Jews in the Los Angeles Mosaic*, ed. by Karen Wilson. Los Angeles, Berkeley, London, pp. 44–56, p. 46.

⁷⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷¹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 55–56.

⁷² Cf. Wilson, 2013, p. 6.

⁷³ Cf. Sandberg, 1989, pp. 9–10.

⁷⁴ Cf. Wilson, 2013, p. 6.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁶ Cf. Shevitz, Amy Hill (2013): "At the Intersection of Gender, Ethnicity, and the City: Three Jewish Women in Los Angeles Politics," in: *Jews in the Los Angeles Mosaic*, ed. by Karen Wilson. Los Angeles, Berkeley, London, pp. 58–74, p. 60.

Jews introduced a specific style of community activism and acquainted new partners for their political goals. A rapidly changing city created new political opportunities for Jews. For Shevitz, this is a “true Californian,” Angeleno-style of making politics in contrast to the reprising of ethnic politics in the Northeast or Midwest of the United States.⁷⁷ Moreover, Jews in L.A. joined non-Jews in the upcoming civil rights, anti-war, and environmental movements.⁷⁸ Los Angeles shaped the Jews, but Jews shaped Los Angeles as well. Confronted with multiculturalism and with a city that enabled reinvention, L.A. Jewry was used to adapting to social changes and quickly created solutions to new problems. Generally speaking, L.A. Jews were already more liberal and more innovative than the rest of the American Jewry when BCC was founded. Most innovations in American Judaism in the last century came from the West (“left”) Coast or from leaders in Los Angeles respectively. The West Coast “was and is an incubator of new religious approaches.”⁷⁹ Next to their political activism, West Coast’s Jewry tried to build religious coalitions across a wide range of positions in order to be successful.⁸⁰ Even though many revolutionary inventions came from the West, fundamental changes had been taking place in American synagogues in general. They also influenced and enabled the founding of the world’s first synagogue with outreach to the gay and lesbian community.

2.3 General Changes in American Synagogues

After World War II, American synagogues underwent changes and became very different places. Furthermore, the way Jews organized themselves religiously changed as well – synagogues were not just places for worship anymore.

With the individualization of Western society, Americans demanded multiple options in life, according to their needs. In synagogues, this led to “multiple worship opportunities.”⁸¹ According to the desires of their

⁷⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 74.

⁷⁸ Cf. Wilson, 2013, p. 7.

⁷⁹ Kaplan, 2009, p. 51.

⁸⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

⁸¹ Wertheimer, 2018, p. 185.

congregants, synagogues started to offer different religious services each week, despite the risk of a synagogue's fragmentation. At the same time, lay commitment was generally enhanced.⁸² Thus, services and the issues raised were not only determined just by the synagogue's leadership. Generally, lay-led services became more common and broadened the topics and problems addressed within the congregation. The sophistication of lay Jewish congregants challenged the sole authority of rabbis and cantors.⁸³ Additionally, synagogues in all denominations established a culture of (Jewish) learning. This culture included Hebrew classes, Torah cantillation and Jewish history and customs.⁸⁴ Social action became part of the educational program as well. Congregations started to sponsor activities in order to help other Jews or even the broader (non-Jewish) community, like providing food or visiting sick community members.⁸⁵ *Tikkun olam* initiatives became far more attractive for new members than praying inside the synagogue building.⁸⁶ While acting responsibly and building social capital, upcoming social issues in the 1960s and 1970s could not be ignored. Issues from the larger American society permeated into the synagogue's life and gave an impetus to question Jewish tradition on how they would approach those challenges. Controversies over how much a synagogue had to deal with political and ideological discussions arose and challenged both religious leaders as well as lay congregants.⁸⁷ Undoubtedly,

“[s]ince the 1970s, the synagogue has been anything but an uncontested bedrock of American Jewish life. [...] Synagogues [...] have been responsive to cultural and social change and the challenges posed. [...] [T]hey have become important testing grounds, even battlegrounds for shaping American Judaism.”⁸⁸

⁸² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 186.

⁸³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 188–189.

⁸⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 191.

⁸⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 193.

⁸⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 194.

⁸⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Prell, Riv-Ellen (2000): “Communities of Choice and Memory: Conservative Synagogues in the Late Twentieth Century,” in: *Jews in the Center: Conservative Synagogues*

One major impetus on the American synagogue was the feminist movement. Women gained a more active role and became equal to their male counterparts, at least in non-Orthodox congregations. Reform Judaism, especially, made significant changes as there was traditionally little ideological opposition towards egalitarianism.⁸⁹ Already in the early history of the movement (19th century), many ritual restrictions for women were lifted. Religious thinkers argued both for women's religious equality and against the religious laws and customs that differentiated between men and women.⁹⁰ Therefore, at least, the theoretical ground was ready. However, male leadership remained silent. Feminists started to challenge their attitudes, most importantly in the *National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods* (NFTS, today *Women of Reform Judaism*). NFTS had already been founded in the 1910s and initially championed the women's traditional role in Judaism limited to the private sphere. However, within the Sisterhoods, women could gain Jewish education and enhance their leadership skills. Women-related topics like sexual abuse or female spirituality were first discussed here. In 1963, the NFTS called for the ordination of women as rabbis and openly demanded that the male-led authorities of Jewish institutions give up their reluctance in this matter.⁹¹ Already in the late 1950s, a committee, formed by the president of the CCAR, had recommended the ordination of women, but the final decisions at the *Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion* (HUC-JIR) and CCAR took another decade.⁹² Finally, Sally Priesand was ordained in 1972 as the first female rabbi in the United States. Her ordination not only had a symbolic value but opened the way for women to increase their influence in the synagogue's life.⁹³ During this first stage of modern Jewish feminism – “equal access feminism”⁹⁴ as Elyse Goldstein calls it – women were

and Their Members, ed. by Jack Wertheimer. New Brunswick, New Jersey, London, pp. 269–358, p. 271.

⁸⁹ Cf. Kaplan, 2003, pp. 187–188.

⁹⁰ Cf. Goldstein, Elyse (2018): “When God meets Gender,” in: *A Life of Meaning. Embracing Reform Judaism's Sacred Path*, ed. by Dana Evan Kaplan. New York, pp. 31–37, p. 32.

⁹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹² Cf. Kaplan, 2003, p. 192.

⁹³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 191.

⁹⁴ Goldstein, 2018, p. 34.

focused on how to gain the same opportunities and responsibilities as men. At a single stroke, women became instantly visible within the synagogue and changed the perception of how a synagogue had to be congregationally constructed. Later, they further challenged the whole theological system and its patriarchal origins.⁹⁵ Denise Eger concludes that the inclusion of homosexual Jews in Reform Judaism was only possible through the innovative atmosphere which arose from the equality and ordination of women and the questioning of gender roles in Jewish religious life and practice.⁹⁶ However, synagogues did not always address the needs of their congregants. Some of them refused innovations and stuck to the traditional top-down governance, others did not implement change as fast as desired. Thus, alternatives to the denominational synagogues were created. The most famous instance were the many *havurot*, groups of young Jews in their twenties and thirties, praying outside the synagogue and outside the three major denominations. A whole wave of *havurot* emerged from the 1960s into the mid-1970s.⁹⁷ Their members criticized the traditional synagogues with their exuberant expressions to the surrounding world and rejected the denominations – but not Judaism *per se*. They wanted to remain small and independent groups in which they could pray, study, and provide a community.⁹⁸ *Havurot* are often referred to as a central element in Jewish counterculture. Within and through them political, religious, cultural, and communal ideas for a social transformation were shared and distributed.⁹⁹ The so-called “niche synagogues” are another phenomenon of a counterculture. They attracted members and attendees from far beyond their local neighborhood as they offered a specific religious agenda.¹⁰⁰ Jews came together, created their own prayers and services, initially without any rabbinic guidance, and were proud of themselves and their

⁹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

⁹⁶ Cf. Eger, Denise (2001): “Embracing Lesbian and Gay Men. A Reform Jewish Innovation,” in: *Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism. Conflicting Visions*, ed. by Dana Evan Kaplan. New York, London, pp. 180–192, pp. 180–181.

⁹⁷ Cf. Prell, Riv-Ellen (1989): *Prayer & Community. The Havurah in American Judaism*. Detroit, p. 15.

⁹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Wertheimer, 2018, p. 236.

outreach.¹⁰¹ One niche was occupied by so called Humanistic congregations, the first of which was founded in 1963 in a suburb of Detroit. The members of Human Congregation built on traditional liturgy and some Jewish texts, celebrated lifecycle events but did not pray. They defined themselves as secularists and nontheistic.¹⁰² With the foundation of BCC and other gay outreach synagogues, these congregations claimed another niche in the complex thicket of American congregational life in the 1970s. The changes in Jewish synagogal life belonged to larger trends in American religious life. Changes such as women's equality or the inclusion of lay congregants in planning and executing services had strong parallels with similar developments in Christian congregations.¹⁰³ Creating a balance between continuity and innovation among religious groups and individuals can be considered "paradigmatically American."¹⁰⁴ In American Christendom, groups with a special purpose formed "subaltern communities," organizational forms which were subordinated or excluded from the dominant Christian institutions. Mostly out of marginalization, they founded their own alternative institutions as a political act and/or created spiritual platforms that included spiritual "safe spaces."¹⁰⁵ The most important subaltern community for the purpose of this study is the *Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches*. *Beth Chayim Chadashim* was born from its mother church, founded in Los Angeles in 1968.

2.4 *The Metropolitan Community Church: BCC's Birthplace*

The situation in Los Angeles in the late 1960s was promising for homosexuals. The homophile movement already had more than ten years of experience. Its members usually criticized the churches and other religious institutions for their rigorous alienation of anyone who came out

¹⁰¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 237.

¹⁰² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 242–243.

¹⁰³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 205–206.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Gray, Edward R.; Thumma, Scott (2005): "Introduction," in: *Gay Religion*, ed. by Edward R. Gray and Scott Thumma. Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York et al., pp. XI–XVI, p. XII.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. *id.* (2005): "Subaltern/Sectarian Expressions," in: *Gay Religion*, ed. by Edward R. Gray and Scott Thumma. Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York et al., pp. 163–166, p. 164.

of the closet. However, the movement “helped construct the theological and institutional groundwork”¹⁰⁶ for an emerging gay religious movement, based on a principle of revealing its member’s identities and confronting the social world with their appearance.¹⁰⁷ The first gay religious gatherings and groups are recorded as early as the 1950s, but they either did not last long or never formed their own congregations.¹⁰⁸ That changed with MCC, which was founded in October 1968. Its history is inextricably linked with the biography of its founder Troy Perry. Troy Perry was born on July 27, 1940, in Tallahassee, Florida. As the oldest of five boys, he had to take responsibility for his family after his father died in a car accident. Perry enjoyed going to different churches,¹⁰⁹ whereas his family only went to their Baptist church on special occasions.¹¹⁰ When his mother re-married, he had problems with his stepfather, so he left home for Georgia to stay with his aunt. At the age of thirteen, he started preaching at a small Pentecostal church.¹¹¹ After his mother divorced her second husband, Perry went back to Florida and supported his mother in getting licensed as a preacher by the Southern Baptist church. At the time, Perry called himself a “religious fanatic.”¹¹² Shortly after he quit high school, Perry married his pastor’s daughter and they had two children. However, he already knew about his homosexual desires and tried to explore them further by reading about them. He even had sexual relations with men during his travels around Alabama as an evangelist of the Church of God.¹¹³ One of his lovers spoke publicly about their encounters, which instigated his excommunication. After appealing for around a year, Perry outed himself in front of his overseer, accepted his ban from church, and ended the relationship

¹⁰⁶ White, Heather Rachele, 2008, p. 105.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 105–106.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Wilcox, Melissa M. (2004): “Churches, Temples, and Religious Groups,” in: *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in America. 1, A to Gyms*, ed. by Marc Stein (editor in chief). New York, Detroit, San Diego et al., pp. 218–220, p. 218.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Perry, 2014, pp. 8–10.

¹¹⁰ Cf. *id.*, Swicegood, 1990, p. 2.

¹¹¹ Cf. Perry, 2014, p. 13.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹¹³ Cf. *id.*, Swicegood, 1990, pp. 14–15.

with his wife.¹¹⁴ Perry got a job offer in Los Angeles and moved in with his mother who had relocated there with her fourth husband. In mid-1960s L. A., he made contact with other homosexuals and discovered the gay scene in Hollywood. There, he met Willie Smith who became Perry's roommate, best friend, and "gay mother," a person who introduces one to other homosexuals.¹¹⁵ Between 1965 and 1967, Perry served in the U.S. Army and when he returned from different bases in Europe, he tried to find a new home in church. But the experience was always the same – as soon as the congregation found out about his homosexuality, Perry was alienated and had to start again.¹¹⁶ Privately, Perry fell in love with another man, but his lover rejected and left him. In response, Perry tried to commit suicide. During his recovery, Perry reports of encounters with God himself who told him that God would love him despite his homosexuality:¹¹⁷ He developed the idea of a church with special outreach to the gay and lesbian community, even though his friends thought that no gay person would be interested in religion anymore.¹¹⁸ Thanks to his former experience as a pastor, he knew how to reach out to people,¹¹⁹ so Perry bought an advertisement in the newly established newspaper *The Advocate*.

On October 6, 1968, twelve men and women showed up at Perry's address where they celebrated the first service of what later would be called the *Metropolitan Community Church*. Among them was one heterosexual couple and one Jew.¹²⁰ Within a few weeks, the numbers of attendees outgrew Perry's living room and the services were relocated to a women's club.¹²¹ Already in 1970, the movement spread out to four other cities in the U.S. and in September, representatives from these branches met for the inaugural conference of the *Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan*

¹¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 19–24.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Perry, 2014, p. 30.

¹¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

¹¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 44–45.

¹¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 47.

¹¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 52–53.

¹²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 56.

¹²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 59.

Community Churches.¹²² Today, more than 200 congregations are part of this umbrella organization. The sublime success of this church can first be attributed to the charismatic leadership and the visionary commitment of Troy Perry.¹²³ He became “the major gay religious leader.”¹²⁴ On the other hand, Los Angeles’ gay community supported the church, especially bar owners and *The Advocate* which distributed MCC’s advertisements regularly (which gained in prominence as *The Advocate* became a nationally distributed newspaper).¹²⁵ Despite Perry’s Pentecostal background, he established a broad doctrinal range right from the beginning, which included Evangelical Reformed, Presbyterian, and independent Catholic voices into his services.¹²⁶ MCC’s growth was accompanied by increasing political and religious diversity. Local pastors were free to experiment. This led to a wide range of theological and liturgical expressions.¹²⁷ Today, congregations offer a mix of Anglican, Pentecostal, and Protestant forms, held together by their commitment to gay spirituality.¹²⁸ However, Perry not solely limited his commitment to the religious sphere. As a religious leader, he engaged in social activism. He fought for the rights of homosexuals during demonstrations and rallies. His work “was modeled on the goals of the black church in America in its struggles for civil rights.”¹²⁹

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, MCC was often the only institution addressing the spiritual needs of queer people.¹³⁰ Since Troy

¹²² Cf. Wilcox, 2004, p. 218.

¹²³ Cf. White, Heather Rachele, 2008, p. 108.

¹²⁴ Faderman, Timmons, 2006, p. 260.

¹²⁵ Cf. White, Heather Rachele, 2008, p. 108.

¹²⁶ Cf. *ibid.* and Wilcox, 2004, p. 218.

¹²⁷ Cf. White, Heather Rachele, 2008, p. 110.

¹²⁸ Cf. Gray, Thumma, “Subaltern/Sectarian Expressions,” 2005, p. 164.

¹²⁹ Faderman, Timmons, 2006, p. 261.

¹³⁰ In 1969, *Dignity*, an organization with outreach to gay Roman Catholics, was founded in San Diego by the heterosexual priest and counselor Father Patrick X. Nidorf. He and his small group moved to Los Angeles shortly after. Early meetings consisted of group therapy, textual discussions, and a Holy Mass. However, *Dignity* only started growing after the Archbishop of Los Angeles forbade Nidorf to continue his work in 1971. Nidorf handed over his leadership to lay activists who strategized their methods for outreach. Then, the number of memberships grew rapidly with the growing number of outed Catholics, counting 300 to 400 members in 1972 (cf. White, Heather Rachele, 2008, pp. 110–113). Other organizations remained in their parent denominations and

Perry gained far-reaching respect through his political engagement, non-Christians were also increasingly attracted to MCC. Perry encouraged everyone, regardless of their religious background and practice, to attend MCC's services.¹³¹ Non-Christians could become "friends" of the church but not official members.¹³² Especially Jewish homosexuals were highly visible at MCC L. A.¹³³ Throughout the country, MCC became a spiritual home for gay Jews searching for religious support without denying their sexuality.¹³⁴ These Jews felt rejected by the homophobic environment in their home synagogues which usually had a strong focus on marriage and family – values homosexual Jews could not fulfill. With this background, a meeting of the weekly Jewish rap group session at MCC L. A. on April 4, 1972, constituted the founding of the *Metropolitan Community Temple (MCT)*, later renamed to *Beth Chayim Chadashim*.

held meetings, Bible study sessions, support groups, or social interactions (cf. Wilcox, 2004, p. 219). Local independent gay clergy founded their own congregations but never reached an impact beyond their cities (cf. White, Heather Rachelle, 2008, pp. 113–115).

¹³¹ Cf. Sukop, 2015, p. 121.

¹³² Cf. White, Heather Rachelle, 2008, p. 109.

¹³³ Cf. Faderman, Timmons, 2006, p. 262.

¹³⁴ Cf. Cooper, 1989, p. 84.

3 A New Synagogue is Born – First Steps and Consolidation

3.1 Building up a Congregation

When MCC L. A. took up its work and attracted people from all religious backgrounds, Jews were able to express their sexual and religious identities for the first time. But it became obvious that Jews as “friends” could not contribute to the Christian church’s policies and services. Regardless of how welcoming the MCC was, Jews felt the need to practice their own religion. During a Chanukah service at MCC in 1971, first conversations occurred about forming an independent prayer group.¹³⁵ However, it took until April 4, 1972, for the idea of a gay temple to become more concrete: MCC offered weekly rap groups in which political and everyday issues were discussed. On the mentioned day, only four people showed up: Selma Kay, Jerry Small, Jerry Gordon, and Bob Zalkin.¹³⁶ They quickly realized that they all were Jews. Selma Kay raised the question of why they should not form a temple with outreach to gay Jews.¹³⁷ They wanted to create a safe space for worshipping within the Jewish tradition and a community

¹³⁵ Cf. BCCR, Box 12, Folder 1, miscellaneous document titled “Shalom.”

¹³⁶ The question on how many people were among the founders of MCT/BCC triggered a discussion inside the congregation. When Stephen J. Sass wrote the first temple’s history for BCC’s 30th anniversary, he mentioned the four persons being present at the rap group (cf. Sass, 2002, p. 5). But Tom Johnson, a later president of the temple, claimed being a part of the founders’ group. Hence, he was added to the official temple’s history (cf. Nathenson, Larry (n.y): *History*. bcc-la.org/about/history/ (last retrieved March 11, 2019)). However, there is no evidence for Johnson’s claim in the temple’s archives. On the contrary: Early minutes only mention four Jews being present on April 4, 1972 (cf. among others BCCR, Box 8, Folder 7, speech “In the beginning there were four” by Jerry Small; *ibid.*, Box 4, Folder 5, “Beth Chayim Chadashim – The House of New Life” by Lorena Wellington (6/12/74), p. 1; Small, Jerry (1973): “Alive, Well and Growing,” in: *Beth Chayim Chadashim Newsletter*. Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 3–4, p. 4). In the end, Tom Johnson was marked as a “non member” in the earliest member and mailing list accessible (cf. BCCR, Box 31, Folder 9, Mailing List July 26, 1973). Therefore, there is no evidence for changing Stephen J. Sass’ account in the temple’s first history.

¹³⁷ Cf. Sass, 2002, p. 6.

which integrated their identity as gays and lesbians.¹³⁸ The four founders decided to reach out to Troy Perry first, asking him to use the church's facilities. Perry replied in favor of this endeavor, charged nothing for the facilities, and added: "No matter what you do, make sure you make it really Jewish."¹³⁹ Furthermore, he gave them the names of twelve other Jews he knew at MCC L. A.

The next step was reaching out to the local Jewish community. Jerry Small was assigned to build up connections and to gain support for the idea. He acquired the name of a rabbi who was described as sympathetic and helpful. However, he wanted to remain anonymous.¹⁴⁰ The rabbi was shocked by the idea at first but finally agreed to meet with Small. During that meeting, the rabbi went through all possibilities and made clear that the only reasonable chance for any kind of acceptance would be contacting the UAHC.¹⁴¹ Troy Perry helped to set up the contact with Rabbi Erwin Herman, the regional director of the Pacific Southwest Council of the UAHC.¹⁴² Small contacted Rabbi Herman, but due to medical reasons, Herman was not able to meet with him, which is why Rabbi Arnold Kaiman, Herman's assistant, welcomed Small in his office.¹⁴³ Small was ready to fight for his idea. However, Kaiman's answer to his inquiry was: "What can we do to help?" Indeed, Kaiman himself was known to be an "innovator" who had already conducted interfaith marriages in the 1970s, or used popular music in his services,¹⁴⁴ but his being open to a synagogue for homosexuals was still a surprise for Small. Kaiman advised holding organizational meetings in order to create a congregation in a slow founding process.¹⁴⁵ The Union itself held prayer books, a Torah as a loan from the Hebrew University in Los Angeles, and candlesticks at the group's

¹³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Cf. BCCR, Box 8, Folder 7, "In the beginning there were four."

¹⁴¹ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁴² Cf. Edwards, Lisa (2008): "Erwin Herman – BCC's Founding Rabbi," in: *G'vanim*. Vol. 36, No. 5, pp. 1–2, p. 1.

¹⁴³ Hertz, 2008, p. 39.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Sukop, 2015, p. 123.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. BCCR, Box 8, Folder 7, "In the beginning there were four."

disposal.¹⁴⁶ The only constraint was that the new congregation should not attract too much publicity, giving it enough freedom to develop and to gain viability for a difficult process of official recognition.¹⁴⁷ It is obvious that the decision for Reform Judaism as the temple's affiliation was made quite early, even before holding the first service. This choice appears to have been an opportunistic one. None of the four founders had been affiliated with the Jewish community at that time.¹⁴⁸ Whereas Conservative Judaism is attached to rabbinical and biblical traditions and was unanimously hostile towards homosexual Jews in the 1970s, a relative openness for new ideas was seen in the Reform Movement, especially on the East Coast. Only within this movement, the synagogue could grow and become an impact on the gay Jewish community. Without the seed funding and other resources provided by the Union, MCT was unlikely to survive in the long term.¹⁴⁹ The prospect of financial and non-material support fostered the decision to guide the new synagogue towards a Reform congregation, even though its first members came from different religious backgrounds.

With the help of the names provided by Troy Perry, the four founders gathered around a dozen Jews from MCC for an ad hoc committee on May 9, 1972. The committee decided to name the “sponsoring organization for the Friday Night Service” *Metropolitan Community Temple*. The attendees expressed the desire to conduct Reform services, probably because Jerry Small's meeting with the UAHC had been positive. Reverend Perry was to announce the first service during his own services, and additionally, an announcement in *The Advocate* was to be published. All activities of MCT were to be held in accordance with MCC, based on the awareness that MCT could only flourish in cooperation with the church.¹⁵⁰ The first service was then held on June 9 with around 15 people¹⁵¹ in the living room

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Small, 1973, p. 3.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Herman, Erwin L. (1973): “A Synagogue for Jewish Homosexuals,” in: *CCAR Journal*. Vol. XX, No. 3, Issue No. 82, pp. 33–40, p. 34.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Sass, 2002, p. 6.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Sukop, 2015, p. 122.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. BCCR, Box 1, Folder 1, Meeting Notes of May 9, 1972.

¹⁵¹ The exact number varies in different sources. Hertz and Sass speak of 15 people (cf. Hertz, 2008, p. 40 and Sass, 2002, p. 7), Small counted 16 (cf. BCCR, Box 8, Folder 7,

of founding member Jerry Gordon.¹⁵² One month later, on July 9, Rabbi Kaiman gave the new congregation a “send-off” during an ecumenical service in MCC, together with Troy Perry who introduced MCT to the community.¹⁵³ After that service, an organizational meeting was held in order to officially form MCT.

The organizational meetings which followed led to a distinctive vision for the new synagogue: The goal was to form “a ‘temple’ of the Jewish faith – to minister the needs of the Jewish and those other interested people to worship in the Jewish faith.”¹⁵⁴ Education, Jewish culture and living as well as promoting community projects and interests would become central elements of the synagogue’s work.¹⁵⁵ MCT was to be guided by a board of directors and one day, it should hire a rabbi. The temple intended to maintain strong relations with MCC and Reverend Perry. A Custodian Committee (that was later renamed Ritual Committee), a Membership Committee, Culture Committee, and a Social Committee would provide the necessary infrastructure.¹⁵⁶ It was decided not to raise any dues from the members. Instead, a hat was passed around for a collection every week. In this procedure, the early members saw the best possibility to raise money, together with donations for special projects or fundraising events. A by-law committee was compiled in order to give the congregations an official structure.¹⁵⁷ Jerry Small and Selma Kay were appointed as co-chairs until the first elections would take place.¹⁵⁸

The weekly Friday night services were relocated to MCC. They were created and led by lay members. The congregation was too small to hire its own rabbi, but the members were successful in hiring guest rabbis who officiated on occasion. The members of the Ritual Committee designed

“In the beginning there were four”), and an article in the NewsWest from October 2, 1975 speaks of 17 (cf. Sarff, 1975, p. 10).

¹⁵² Cf. Sass, 2002, p. 7.

¹⁵³ Cf. Small, 1973, p. 3.

¹⁵⁴ BCCR, Box 1, Folder 1, Meeting July 20, 1972.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 4, Folder 5, “Beth Chayim Chadashim – The House of New Life,” p. 3.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 1, Meeting July 20, 1972.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 4, Folder 5, “Beth Chayim Chadashim – The House of New Life,” p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, List of Executive Officers for Beth Chayim Chadashim, A Metropolitan Community Temple.

“creative services,” reflecting the member’s different religious backgrounds. The committee drew on liturgy by Reform and Conservative congregations.¹⁵⁹ Often, they followed the Union Prayer book but added different elements from the Torah or from Haftarat. Lorena Wellington, MCT’s first secretary, stated: “Perhaps our services were too radical, others said they were too orthodox, others said they were too conservative. [...] we learned by trial and error [...]”¹⁶⁰ But she added in a sermon in December 1972: “Tho [sic!] we differ in practice, [...] we have two factors in common. We are [g]ay but more important, [w]e are Jews; Jews who identify with Judaism, and we were proud of our more than 5,000 years of heritage.”¹⁶¹

The new congregation succeeded in conducting the first High Holiday services without a rabbi,¹⁶² with “merely rabbinical direction” from the UAHC. Cantor Mary Anne Freiheiter (later Kadosh), heterosexual herself, assisted during the services.¹⁶³ Around 175 people attended the services, homosexual and heterosexual alike,¹⁶⁴ symbolizing the need of a synagogue with outreach to the gay and lesbian community.

3.2 Supporters from the First Minute: Erwin and Agnes Herman

The new congregation could rely on a number of early supporters, whose support was crucial in its forming years. Firstly, Reverend Troy Perry encouraged the Jewish visitors of his church in founding their own temple. He used his connections with the L. A. religious and political landscape in order to foster the founding process and intensively promoted acquiring new members. His church provided space for MCT until the congregation found its own building in 1977. Secondly, Norman Eichberg, then president of the Pacific Southwest Council of the UAHC, supported the

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Sass, 2002, p. 7.

¹⁶⁰ BCCR, Box 4, Folder 5, “Beth Chayim Chadashim – The House of New Life,” p. 7.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., Box 8, Folder 18, “What are we,” Sermon, Lorena Wellington 12–72.

¹⁶² Rabbi Herman noted that there were homophobic tendencies that prevented the congregation from obtaining a rabbi for the High Holidays (see Chapter 4.2 “*Leave the decision to the homosexuals:*” *Supporting BCC’s Admission*).

¹⁶³ Cf. BCCR, Box 30, Folder 1, Invitation First High Holiday Services.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Sass, 2002, p. 9.

congregation from the moment he heard about its founding. His motivation stemmed from the coming-out of his own son Rob.¹⁶⁵ Eichberg conducted the first Passover Seder in April 1973 and remained a regular guest during important services.

But the most influential support was given by Rabbi Erwin Herman and his wife Agnes. Both experienced the same, unexpected confrontation with homosexuality as Eichberg: Their son, Jeff, came out as gay as well. It was a challenging time for the couple: “We needed time, time to think, to talk to each other.”¹⁶⁶ Especially Erwin had had a traditional and anti-gay mindset.¹⁶⁷ Years followed in which the Hermans’ went through therapy and reflection. With learning more about Jeff and his life, Agnes and Erwin became more and more at ease with his sexuality.¹⁶⁸ This personal experience might have been the incentive for Erwin Herman to take on the rabbinic support for MCT after Jerry Small met with Rabbi Kaiman.¹⁶⁹

“Rabbi Herman became our champion,”¹⁷⁰ MCT’s secretary Lorena Wellington summarized. Not only did he become a paying member (until his death in 2008), but he was an important advisor and mentor for the lay-led services.¹⁷¹ He helped to obtain guest speakers and provided the congregation with the necessary material for services and education classes (for instance a Judaica collection and a *yad* for Torah reading).¹⁷² Herman even became a spokesperson for the congregation. He gave interviews in favor of the synagogue and underlined his support, for instance in *The Jewish Heritage* at the beginning of 1973: “From the point of view of Reform Judaism, these [i. e. homosexuals] are people facing their own condition. They have become a social grouping.”¹⁷³ The members of the synagogue

¹⁶⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁶⁶ Herman, Agnes G. (1985): “My Son and I Came Out of the Closet,” in: *Reconstructionist*. Vol. LI, No. 2, pp. 26–31, p. 28.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Hertz, 2008, p. 42.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Herman, Agnes, 1985, pp. 29–31.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Hertz, 2008, p. 40.

¹⁷⁰ BCCR, Box 4, Folder 5, “Beth Chayim Chadashim – The House of New Life,” p. 2.

¹⁷¹ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁷² Cf. Sass, 2002, p. 7.

¹⁷³ BCCR, Box 3, Folder 14, Clipping “Homosexuals Have Own Synagogue” by David Weismann.

replied with gratitude and interest. During their first visit to MCT, Agnes and Erwin Herman were welcomed directly on the steps and were escorted into the building. They remembered it as the warmest greeting they ever received.¹⁷⁴

Rabbi Herman understood how important it was to create a safe and spiritual place for gay and lesbian Jews. Therefore, he guided the temple through the affiliation process of the UAHC. He knew what an impact the recognition of MCT/BCC could have on the whole Reform Movement and for the recognition and integration of queer Jews in organized Jewish life in general.¹⁷⁵ But the Hermans did not stop there. They committed themselves to gender equality and LGBTQ rights for their whole lives from there on. In 2001, they contributed financially to the *Virtual Resource Center for Sexual Orientation Issues* at the Institute for Judaism and Sexual Orientation (located at HUC-JIR Los Angeles). Its purpose is to empathize with the needs of queer Jews and to promote inclusivity in Jewish communities. The center was named after their son Jeff who eventually died of AIDS.¹⁷⁶ Rabbi Herman's efforts were undoubtedly essential for the success of BCC; he was indeed "BCC's founding rabbi."¹⁷⁷

3.3 Decisive Congregational Meetings in December 1972 and January 1973

After the successful High Holiday services in September 1972, the leading members of the congregation attempted to consolidate the newly founded temple. A committee was formed to work out by-laws. As a reference, the committee's members used by-laws from the twelve largest U.S. congregations.¹⁷⁸ Their work resulted in the first by-laws that were passed in a gen-

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Edwards, 2008, p. 2.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Hertz, 2008, pp. 44–45.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (April 2, 2001): Agnes and Rabbi Erwin Herman Establish Virtual Resource Center for HUC-JIR's Sexual Orientation Issues in Congregations and Community Initiative. <http://huc.edu/news/2001/04/02/agnes-and-rabbi-erwin-herman-establish-virtual-resource-center-huc-jirs-sexual> (last retrieved March 13, 2019).

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Edwards, 2008.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. BCCR, Box 4, Folder 5, "Beth Chayim Chadashim – The House of New Life," p. 3.

eral meeting of MCT members in October. They regulated all the temple's current issues comprehensively (executive boards, committees) as well as future ones (e.g. hiring a rabbi). Right at the start, the by-laws codified the temple's purpose:

“to affirm [...] faithful attachment to Judaism and to apply the principles of Judaism to their personal conduct, to family life, to interpersonal relationships, and to society.”¹⁷⁹

The congregation, therefore, expressed its intention to affiliate with the UAHC at this point already. Notably, the by-laws stated that Judaism should not be interpreted inconsistently with Reform Judaism.¹⁸⁰ That direction was unquestioned and the congregation headed towards affiliation with the Reform Movement.

More debatable was the by-laws' Article V concerning membership. By-law committee members Gerry Gordon and Jerry Krieger presented their vision of “What A Member Is” during the general meeting mentioned above. The minutes report a discussion on the issue,¹⁸¹ resulting in:

“A member is any person accepting the Purposes of Metropolitan Community Temple. The Metropolitan Community Temple being a Jewish House of Worship.”¹⁸²

The policy accepting “any person” as a synagogue member caused rejection by parts of the congregation. At that moment, the notion to accept heterosexuals as members was indisputable. They were essential supporters. However, the question of whether non-Jews could join the synagogue was controversial. Shortly after the general meeting's decision, 13 members gathered in another informal meeting and signed a petition calling

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., Box 3, Folder 24, By Laws of the Metropolitan Community Temple October 17, 1972.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Cf. BCCR, Box 1, Folder 1, General Meeting of Metropolitan Community Temple October 6, 1972.

¹⁸² Ibid., Box 3, Folder 24, By Laws of the Metropolitan Community Temple October 17, 1972.

for a reconsideration of the matter.¹⁸³ The Steering Committee addressed this petition on November 6 and decided to reopen the debate about the by-laws on membership in the next congregational meeting. Both sides were supposed to have the chance to present their arguments. The committee itself did not want to take any position yet.¹⁸⁴

The committee sent out a letter to all congregants with a list of pro and contra statements on November 19.¹⁸⁵ The arguments presented argued for or against a closed membership that would be only accessible for Jews: On the pro side, the temple should be a Jewish house of worship. An open membership would negate the original purpose of the congregation and confuse the religious identity of the temple. By emphasizing their Jewishness and having Jewish leadership and participation, the members on the pro side believed they would reaffirm and rediscover their joy in Judaism. Additionally, in the light of increasing antisemitism in society, Jews should stand together and declare their shared identity. A closed membership policy would achieve respect and admiration among Christians. Another major argument concerned the aspired membership with the UAHC. An open membership would threaten the Union's support and recognition. A rejection by the Union would mean "derriving [sic!] us of the opportunity of being a vital force in the gay community."¹⁸⁶

The members supporting an open membership reminded the congregation that Jews and gays "have been the subject of the worse sorts of discrimination through the years."¹⁸⁷ The congregation should not exclude anyone who supports the same goals. They criticized the assumption that

¹⁸³ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 26, Folder 10, letter to the congregation of November 19, 1972.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 2, Steering Committee Meeting November 6, 1972.

¹⁸⁵ In the same letter, the committee announced that they would intend to change the name of the temple from *Metropolitan Community Temple* to *Beth Or Shalom – The House of The Light of Peace* (cf. *ibid.*, Box 26, Folder 10, letter to the congregation of November 19, 1972). During the congregational meeting on December 15, the members discussed various Hebrew names for the synagogue. A decision was postponed to another congregational meeting in January. A Naming Committee was installed in order to do research on the various proposed names (cf. *ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 2, Congregational Meeting December 15, 1972).

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, Box 26, Folder 10, Pro Points.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, Box 25, Folder 18, Arguments for Retaining Present Membership Requirements.

non-Jews would wish to undermine the Jewish character of the temple. This attitude would attest to a basic lack of faith in the people. If non-Jews were to be excluded, heterosexuals would have to be excluded as well in consequence since they could attempt to try to influence and determine the temple's gay outreach. The contra side called for testing the membership policies that had been already laid down in the last congregational meeting.¹⁸⁸

Before the congregation could vote on the issue, a significant change in their leadership took place. During the Steering Committee meeting on November 19, co-chair Selma Kay handed in a letter of resignation. She explained it with health issues but elaborated in depth on the inability of her co-chair Jerry Small to work as a team: He "has become increasingly hostile and unwilling to share this leadership position."¹⁸⁹ In order to protect herself, she withdrew from her position as chairwoman. After her letter was read out during the committee meeting, Jerry Small immediately submitted his verbal resignation from the chair as well.¹⁹⁰ Later, he emphasized in a letter to the committee that he resigned from an office but not from the temple and that he would work harder than before for the temple's success.¹⁹¹ Sherry Sokoloff was then elected interim president until the election of the temple's officers planned for January.¹⁹²

Sokoloff had to guide the congregation through important decisions. The first at the congregational meeting on December 15 was on a closed or open membership. The Steering Committee unanimously decided to support a closed membership.¹⁹³ Sokoloff tied her future as interim president to the vote. In her call to business for the congregational meeting, she prepared two scenarios. If the congregation voted for the open membership policy, she would step down and leave the congregation to itself. In the case of a closed membership, she prepared to appoint a nominating

¹⁸⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, Arguments for Retaining Present Membership Requirements.

¹⁸⁹ BCCR, Box 26, Folder 10, letter of resignation November 19, 1972.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 2, Steering Committee Meeting November 19, 1972.

¹⁹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, letter of Jerry Small from December 11, 1972.

¹⁹² Cf. *ibid.*, Steering Committee Meeting November 19, 1972.

¹⁹³ Cf. *ibid.*, Steering Committee Meeting December 12, 1972.

committee for the first election of the board of directors.¹⁹⁴ Eventually, the congregation voted 20–8 in favor of a closed membership.¹⁹⁵ That cleared the way for the next congregational meeting on January 26, 1973. Here, the members were not only supposed to elect the temple's officers, but they were also to vote for a new, Hebrew name for the congregation as well. This was regarded as necessary in order to distinguish the synagogue from MCC.¹⁹⁶

The previously installed Naming Committee suggested several names. Besides the Steering Committee's favorite "Beth Or Shalom – The House of the Light of Peace," other suggestions were "Children of Pride – Yeladim Shel Gaavah," "The House of the Children of Peace – Beth Yeladim [sic!] Shalom," "The House of the Children of Unity – Beth Yeladim Shel Achdus," "The House of Eternal Truth – Beth Tamit [sic!] Emeth," "The House of Wisdom and Understanding – Beth Chohma VeHavanah," "The House of Eternal Life – Beth Ha Chayim," "Temple Emanuel", and "Congregation Beth Ahavah (The House of Love)."¹⁹⁷ Jerry Small noted during the congregational meeting that the synagogue's name should reflect its ties with MCC.¹⁹⁸ He suggested "House of New Life," inspired by *New Life*, MCC's newsletter. During the meeting, a friend translated it into "Beth Chayim Chadash" which was passed with 26–0 votes. Later, it was pointed out that the Hebrew was incorrect, so the congregation changed it to "Beth Chayim Chadashim."¹⁹⁹

The second decision made in the meeting was the election of the temple's first board of directors. Rabbi Herman recalls those elections to be "torrid:"²⁰⁰ Stuart Zinn defeated the former co-chair Selma Kay in the race for the temple's president. Jerry Small became vice-president, Milt Sanford

¹⁹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, Call of Business Congregational Meeting December 15, 1972.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, Congregational Meeting December 15, 1972.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Sass, 2002, p. 9.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. BCCR, Box 1, Folder 3, Suggested Names for the Temple.

¹⁹⁸ Conversation with Jerry Small by phone (October 26, 2018).

¹⁹⁹ Stephen J. Sass stated that Rabbi Herman had noted this inconsistency (cf. Sass, 2002, p. 10). However, Rabbi Stanford Ragins also claims to be the one to have corrected the mistake (personal conversation with Rabbi Stanford Ragins on October 30, 2018).

²⁰⁰ Herman, 1973, p. 36.

treasurer, and Lorena Wellington was approved as secretary. Additionally, the members voted on a revised version of the by-laws. With these by-laws, the temple was ready to receive a non-profit status and incorporation by the state and federal governments.²⁰¹

Now, the congregation was ready to face other important decisions in the future, most notably the admission to the UAHC. To celebrate the success of the evening, a few members went out for a late night snack at a local deli. However, the celebrations were interrupted by a shocking message: MCC's building was on fire.

3.4 Between Devastation and Intense Joy

The fire at MCC was “of suspicious origin.” The victims suspected sabotage, but an electrical short could not be precluded.²⁰² Later, arson was ruled out by the Fire Department²⁰³ and charges have never been filed.²⁰⁴

As soon as the celebrating members of BCC received the message about the fire, they rushed to the venue. They knew that their Torah was still in the building and shouted at the fire chief. Persuaded, he asked for one member to go into the burning building to rescue the Torah. BCC's members selected their recently elected president Stuart Zinn. He carried the scroll out of the burning church, “waterdamaged, but safe.”²⁰⁵ The congregation spent the entire night drying and recovering the Torah scroll: “Our togetherness was never closer than at that moment.”²⁰⁶ Later, the congregation had the Torah repaired and returned it to its owner, the Hebrew University of Los Angeles. However, their meeting space was lost. Nevertheless, the congregation decided to support MCC by rededicating their monthly rent for the church's facilities to a donation.²⁰⁷

²⁰¹ Cf. BCCR, Box 1, Folder 3, Order of Business Congregational Meeting January 26, 1973.

²⁰² Cf. *ibid.*, Box 4, Folder 5, “Beth Chayim Chadashim – The House of New Life,” p. 5.

²⁰³ Cf. Sass, 2002, p. 10.

²⁰⁴ Cf. BCCR, Box 3, Folder 14, Clipping “Mother Church Burns!”

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Box 4, Folder 5, “Beth Chayim Chadashim – The House of New Life,” p. 6.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Cf. BCCT, Box 1, Folder 5, Board of Directors Special Meeting January 28, 1973.

When both rabbis Leonard I. Beerman and Sanford Ragins of the *Leo Baeck Temple (LBT)* in Los Angeles heard about what had happened, they immediately contacted BCC and offered them their temple's classrooms free of charge. Rabbi Ragins could not imagine and had never heard about a synagogue for homosexuals before. When the press reported about the fire in MCC and simultaneously mentioned BCC, Ragins began to question his own reservations towards homosexuals. However, to him, it was more important for the moment that a Jewish congregation, regardless of its orientation, was in urgent need.²⁰⁸ So, he and Rabbi Beerman asked their temple's board for its approval to host BCC. Nobody objected.²⁰⁹ BCC moved to LBT for the next 14 months and both rabbis became influential supporters of the congregation, officiating on occasion or speaking up in public on its behalf.

However, with the fire, another problem arose for BCC. Due to the national popularity of MCC, media throughout the U.S. covered the incident. As a result, BCC attracted more attention on a national scale. The knowledge about BCC's connections to the UAHC was at first limited to the West Coast's rabbinic leadership.²¹⁰ The UAHC and especially Rabbi Herman wanted to prevent publicity in order to prepare the application process without an early and uncontrollable debate about Jewish homosexuals. Most significant was an article by John Dart in the *Los Angeles Times* on February 14, 1973. This article circulated throughout the country. Dart wrote about Rabbi Herman's support of the gay outreach synagogue and the UAHC's involvement in its founding.²¹¹ The media coverage caused intensive debates within the American Reform Movement which led to the composition of several *responsa* dealing with the nature of gay outreach synagogues.²¹²

²⁰⁸ Personal conversation with Rabbi Sanford Ragins (October 30, 2018).

²⁰⁹ Cf. Sass, 2002, p. 11.

²¹⁰ Cf. Hertz, 2008, p. 51.

²¹¹ Cf. Dart, John (February 14, 1973): "Growing Homosexual Churches Aid Many," in: *Los Angeles Times*.

²¹² These *responsa* will be addressed in Chapter 4 *Applying for Membership into the Union of American Hebrew Congregations*.

After BCC's relocation to LBT and after getting acquainted with the new situation, the congregation came together on March 3 to celebrate the acquisition of their own Torah scroll. Already in 1972, MCT's leadership had discovered the Memorial Scrolls Trust of Westminster Synagogue in the United Kingdom. The synagogue stored 1,564 Torah scrolls that were collected at the Jewish Museum in Prague from congregations wiped out by the Nazis in 1942. Three Jews from London purchased and rescued the scrolls and brought them to the U. K. The Memorial Trust's mission was to hand out these Torah scrolls to vivid Jewish communities on a permanent, lifetime loan. An anonymous donor²¹³ covered the costs for the repair and the shipment of scroll number 115 to Los Angeles. The scroll came from the Czech city of Chotěboř and was written in 1880.²¹⁴ Chotěboř's Jewish community was completely destroyed by June 1942 and the Torah was sent to Prague shortly before the community's annihilation.

On January 5, 1973, the scroll arrived in Los Angeles. Stuart Zinn picked it up and stored it until the dedication ceremony at his home.²¹⁵ The significance of the Torah was too high to take any risks. Luckily, this decision saved the Torah from the fire at MCC. Its dedication was considered a ceremony "that will make the Metropolitan Community Temple formally a Temple on equal footing amongst all Temples in the city."²¹⁶ The congregation even invited Israel's prime minister Golda Meir to the ceremony, who was planning a trip to the West Coast at that time. However, she was unable "due to her very busy schedule."²¹⁷

The dedication ceremony was celebrated with around 400 people attending, among them Reverend Troy Perry and Dr. Lewis M. Barth, dean of the *Hebrew Union College California School*. Rabbi Herman, Rabbi Ragins, and Cantor Dora Krakower, one of the first female cantors in the U.S.,

²¹³ Rabbi Herman mentioned that the donor had been an L. A. practicing professional who had lived a straight life on the outside but could not risk revealing his homosexuality (cf. Herman, 1973, p. 35).

²¹⁴ Cf. Sukop, 2019, p. 55.

²¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 55–56.

²¹⁶ BCCR, Box 1, Folder 2, Torah Dedication Invitation.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Box 3, Folder 14, letter from Eli Mizrahi of February 20, 1973.

officiated.²¹⁸ Most notably, the Torah was carried into the Leo Back Temple's sanctuary by a woman.²¹⁹ William Dorr Legg, the co-founder of *ONE Inc.*, was "astonished and deeply impressed" by the ceremony:

"[...] a lengthy service which included a procession of the Torah through the Temple so that the faithful might kiss its wrappings, or even touch it. There were scriptural readings, singing by the Cantor, three rabbis in attendance, excellent speeches by the officers of Metropolitan Community Temple itself."²²⁰

The Torah dedication marked a significant chapter in BCC's history. It was the congregation's biggest event yet and attracted many supporters from the L. A. area. The possession of their own Torah scroll underlined the aspiration of being an independent Jewish congregation.

3.5 Working towards an Organized Synagogal Structure

For every congregation, the number of (paying) memberships is crucial for its success. This applied especially to a new temple like BCC. Therefore, its leadership posted advertisements for services in several newspapers and journals with outreach to the gay and lesbian community. They hoped to reach their Jewish readership and attract them to the synagogue. As Moshe Shokeid compiled it, there are several reasons why people joined a gay synagogue: Many gay or lesbian Jews were raised in a Jewish environment and were involved in traditional synagogal life in their youth. When they found out about their sexuality, they often dissociated from their parents' synagogues which did not accept their sexual orientation. In a gay synagogue, suddenly it was possible to connect their past Jewish experience with their present gay or lesbian life.²²¹ Others searched for a kind of spirituality at a certain point of their lives, without having been attached to religious traditions before, and yet others were on a social search, less interested

²¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, Memorandum February 27, 1973.

²¹⁹ Cf. BCCR, Box 4, Folder 5, "Beth Chayim Chadashim – The House of New Life," p. 7.

²²⁰ Dorr Legg, William (1973): "Religious Gays Gain, ONE for us" (reprint from ONE-LETTER Vol. XVIII, No. 3), in: *Beth Chayim Chadashim Newsletter*. Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 8–9, p. 8.

²²¹ Cf. Shokeid, 2003, pp. 64–67.

in religion but in a safe place to meet people.²²² According to Shokeid, another group is those who came to a gay synagogue as a “culmination of a process of personal reintegration.”²²³ They were not alienated so much from their religion as from their sexual identity. Most of them had been married before. In a gay synagogue, they merged their identities of being Jewish and gay.²²⁴ Another group consists of those who joined a gay synagogue out of a desire for social comfort and inclusion. Especially women were among this group: In many synagogues, they were separated from the men, they could not become rabbis or cantors, and the liturgic texts were strictly gendered. Gay synagogues challenged those perceptions with mixed seating arrangements, do-it-yourself Judaism, and texts with an awareness of sex and gender. Finally, a single person was not regarded as an outsider anymore.²²⁵

BCC’s membership list of July 26, 1973, counts 64 members and 48 non-members on the mailing list.²²⁶ Half a year later, the congregation had a stable number of members but around three times the number of interested people on the mailing list.²²⁷ A serious debate emerged on whether heterosexual Jews should join the synagogue:

“The Temple’s leaders recognized that if a large number of ‘straight’ Jews would join the congregation, a significant number of ‘gay’ Jews would refuse to join for fear of exposing themselves. Against this they weighed the ultimate meaning of synagogue and agreed that membership must be left open [to all sexual orientations].”²²⁸

The increasing number of people involved or interested in the temple raised another challenge. BCC had to address the spiritual needs of the three major divisions in Judaism (Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox) but also had to consider those members who had only a little or even

²²² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 67–70.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 70–72.

²²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 73–75.

²²⁶ Cf. BCCR, Box 31, Folder 9, Mailing List July 26, 1973.

²²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 27, Folder 18, List #2 1974.

²²⁸ Herman, 1973, p. 35.

no religious upbringing. Others only went to the synagogue because they had a strong cultural identification with Judaism.²²⁹ As a reaction, there was a notion to split the congregation into *havurot* “to further the Judaic way of life.”²³⁰ A group should contain at least ten members (in order to obtain a *minyan*). It was planned to hold a meeting once a month in which the group should study and eat together: “The Havurah celebrates Jewish life through study, observance of holidays and socializing together. [...] Creating and conducting a Friday Evening Service.”²³¹ However, it turned out that it would be too difficult to make up groups which were capable of addressing both educational and social purposes. Hence, it was resolved that there would only be one general gathering once a month in an informal setting with lectures, music, or group discussions.²³² In the matter of Friday night services, the congregation maintained the expertise of the ritual committee, the guidance of Rabbi Erwin Herman, and several guest rabbis. At the beginning of 1974, the congregation succeeded in hiring Cantor Saul Silverman on a bi-weekly basis.

Another first-minute goal of BCC regarded Jewish education. BCC’s members either came from non-traditional backgrounds or had lost their connection to Judaism due to their sexual orientation. Therefore, the congregation organized their first adult education class “Basic Judaism” in March 1973. This twelve-week program was advised by Rabbi Allen Secher, Director of Education at the UAHC, and was moderated by two congregants. The congregation knew Rabbi Secher at least since December 1972²³³ when he had stepped in for Rabbi Herman in inviting guest rabbis for the Shabbat services. He started planning the educational program with the congregations in February 1973.²³⁴ Due to the great success of the first course, the temple offered the second semester of education classes beginning in October 1973. They conducted two classes: “Prayer Book Hebrew”

²²⁹ Cf. BCCR, Box 2, Folder 1, miscellaneous document without title.

²³⁰ Ibid., Box 1, Folder 5, Minutes Board Meeting April 12, 1973.

²³¹ Ibid., The Havurah Groups April 20, 1973.

²³² Cf. BCCR, Box 1, Folder 5, Report on the Havurah Groups August 14, 1973.

²³³ Cf. *ibid.*, Folder 2, Steering Committee Meeting December 12, 1972.

²³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, Folder 1, Minutes Boards of Directors February 15, 1973.

for a better understanding of Hebrew prayer texts and “Introduction to the Bible.”²³⁵ Another attempt in satisfying the educational needs of the congregation (and for the ritual committee’s further education) was the setup of a library. In March 1973, the secretary sent out letters to different libraries in the L. A. area and asked for donations, especially on Judaism, Jewish customs, and ceremonies.²³⁶ Together with the Judaica donations by Rabbi Herman, a library could be built up successively.

The revolutionary character of BCC did not go unnoticed by other queer Jews. After being one year in existence, BCC already received correspondence from Mexico, Israel, Hawaii, England, Denmark, and from all around the United States. Some even asked for advice on how to build a gay outreach synagogue.²³⁷ In order to coordinate their outreach, the temple thought about establishing a newsletter. However, in the beginning, there were several internal problems that led to the dissolution of the newsletter committee.²³⁸ Still, with the help of volunteers, the first newsletter was published in September 1973 and a second one in December. But once again, the newsletter committee did not fulfill its purpose, leading to the third attempt in July 1974. This time, the editors were successful in publishing the newsletter every month. In a short time, the newsletter evolved to the most important voice of the congregation – for its members but also for its supporters in the United States and beyond. Additionally, the congregation promoted good relations with the L. A. authorities. For its 1st anniversary service, BCC hosted representatives from the city’s mayor, councilmen, and other representatives from San Diego and San Francisco.²³⁹ BCC connected to the non-Jewish gay world as well: Morris Kite, one of the founders of the gay liberation movement, spoke as a guest speaker during the anniversary service.²⁴⁰ The congregation aimed to achieve visibility and to become a notable Jewish force in the gay community.

²³⁵ Cf. BCCR, Box 3, Folder 14, letter to members September 21, 1973.

²³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, Folder 31, letter to librarians March 14, 1973.

²³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, Folder 14, speech “Shalom” for 1st anniversary service.

²³⁸ Cf. BCCR, Box 1, Folder 1, Board Meeting July 19, 1973.

²³⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 4, Folder 5, “Beth Chayim Chadashim – The House of New Life,” p. 7.

²⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 3, Folder 14, speech “Shalom” for 1st anniversary service.

After the fire in MCC, the question of a suitable building for the synagogue's purposes became apparent. The congregation's leadership knew that they could not stay at LBT forever and in June/July 1973, president Stuart Zinn started looking for new sites.²⁴¹ The search proved to be difficult. However, in January 1974, MCC made BCC an offer to use its chapel and three additional rooms in their new church building. The board of directors could not reach agreement but instead let the congregation decide. Prior to a congregational meeting, the board sent out a pro/contra list.²⁴² The congregation voted for the relocation to MCC, and in May 1974 the temple moved to the church's facilities, just prior to the decision about the UAHC membership.

3.6 Facing Gender Issues

Within the congregation, constant tensions were caused by the ongoing conflicts between men and women.²⁴³ In 1973, only around 20 % of the members were women.²⁴⁴ From the beginning, the congregation treated women equally, for instance, rejecting separate seating in a synagogue.²⁴⁵ Lorena Wellington resumes that "we lesbians discovered our brothers and they discovered us. [...] Here we became brothers and sisters and held status in each other's eyes."²⁴⁶ However, sexist language and androcent-

²⁴¹ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 1, Board Meeting July 19, 1973.

²⁴² Pro arguments included the more convenient location of the chapel in Downtown L. A., the dignity and comfort of a chapel compared to a classroom, the renewed friendship and association with MCC, and proving that Christians and Jews could share facilities in love and harmony. Additionally, closeted gays could come to service without attracting straight Jews' attention. Contra arguments entailed that BCC could lose its identity as an independent Jewish congregation and become too closely identified with MCC. Services and the understanding of the Bible could be "Christianized" or MCC members could possibly try to convert BCC members. BCC could also be identified with "militant gay rights activists" at MCC. Moreover, LBT would be more prestigious and would help with the membership application at the UAHC. Lastly, the congregation could lose its desire to find an own building through the comfortable offer by MCC (cf. *ibid.*, Folder 3, A Proposal to be voted upon by the members of Beth Chayim Chadashim).

²⁴³ Cf. Sass, 2002, p. 12.

²⁴⁴ Cf. BCCR, Box 31, Folder 9, Mailing List July 26, 1973.

²⁴⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 12, Folder 1, miscellaneous document titled "Shalom."

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Box 4, Folder 5, "Beth Chayim Chadashim – The House of New Life," p. 7.

trism within traditional Jewish liturgy caused opposition among lesbian members. Harriet Perl gathered several other women and they addressed their concerns to their male counterparts. She recalls: “[...] they really listened, and there was never a need for a gender fight.”²⁴⁷ Her and the other women’s engagement led to the first prayerbook with degenderized language, introduced in 1975.²⁴⁸

Nevertheless, sexist language from the male congregants remained an issue at BCC. Once, it led to a public apology by vice-president Jerry Small in the newsletter:

“As I was responsible for a great part of the last mailer, I would like to apologize to all the women in the congregation for the sexism reflected in that mailer. I am merely a male whose consciousness needs raising.”²⁴⁹

Another incident occurred in a service led by Rabbi Herman. During his sermon, two women stood up and yelled at the rabbi. In their eyes, Herman’s comments were not only sexist but discrediting the women’s liberation movement. As one woman explained, she answered with verbal violence as Rabbi Herman had been using verbal violence against her: “I’m a woman and I’m sick and tired of grinning and shuffling when my liberation is belittled, insulted, and degraded – for some (heterosexual!) man’s fun.”²⁵⁰ In her letter to the congregation, the woman called Aldebaran advised questioning power structures. Only then, the congregation could overcome oppression within the congregation.²⁵¹

This incident with two women, who were not members of the congregation, was utilized by a congregant as an opportunity to criticize the Affirmation Action Committee. It was established to create a more comfortable atmosphere and to get more women interested in the congregation. The congregant complained about the committee’s political rather

²⁴⁷ Faderman, Timmons, 2006, p. 264.

²⁴⁸ Cf. Beth Chayim Chadashim – Order of Prayer, Seder Tefillot Yisrael (1975), First Edition.

²⁴⁹ Small, Jerry (1974): “The VEEP’s Vords,” in: *Beth Chayim Chadashim Newsletter*. Vol. 2, No. 3, p. 3.

²⁵⁰ BCCR, Box 26, Folder 1, letter to Newsletter Editor of December 8, 1975.

²⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*

than religious or social agenda. He called for respectful behavior and demanded to stop using the temple as “a platform to air [...] own personal ego trips, seculal [sic! i.e. sexual] identity crises or frustrations.”²⁵² This letter led to a statement of the Affirmation Action Committee claiming that the women had the right to speak up, even though it condemned how they did so. The committee “belong[s] to all of us, for the benefit of us all,”²⁵³ therefore, any criticism was approached seriously.

However, the Affirmation Action Committee’s work was highlighted by a female congregant in a public address in August 1975. She reported that, when she first came to BCC, the majority of service attendees were male, still using the gendered traditional texts. She had stayed away from the temple. But the board of directors wanted to understand why women stayed absent. Their sincerity impressed the congregant.²⁵⁴ Women’s rap groups were created (“I came back and rapped – hard”²⁵⁵) and after debating heavily with the male leadership, the Affirmation Action Committee was created. It covered the needs of women and lesbians comprehensively. In her address, the female congregant underlined that the temple had already fulfilled many needs of the male congregants but “for the women, it is beginning.”²⁵⁶ In contrast to Lorena Wellington, who spoke about brotherhood and sisterhood in her historical remarks in 1974, the addressing congregant only saw a “Jewish Temple of gay unity” in the near future.²⁵⁷

It becomes apparent that the relationship between male and female congregants was an intensively discussed topic in the early history of BCC. However, this was not just an L. A. development. Other gay outreach

²⁵² A Concerned Member (1975): “Letter to the Editor,” in: *Beth Chayim Chadashim Newsletter*. Vol. 3, No. 6, pp. 12–13, p. 13.

²⁵³ T.H. (1976): “Letters to the Editor,” in: *Beth Chayim Chadashim Newsletter*. Vol. 3, No. 7, pp. 11–12, p. 12.

²⁵⁴ Cf. Anonymous (1975): “I am a woman... I am a Jew... I am a lesbian,” in: *Beth Chayim Chadashim Newsletter*. Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 13–17, p. 15.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁵⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

congregations like CBST in New York dealt with the same issue at the time.²⁵⁸ The discussions inside BCC did not end with the establishment of the Affirmation Action Committee. The question of women's attendance and representation, the usage of sexist language, and male prevalence was addressed for many more years. However, they receded when BCC hired its first ordained rabbi in 1983 – a heterosexual woman, Janet Marder.²⁵⁹

In an article published in 2005, Melissa Wilcox argues that women's lives are “an integral part of the complexity of religion.”²⁶⁰ From her point of view, previous research on LGBT congregations only included the women's issue by realizing that they were mostly absent in the early years of those congregations.²⁶¹ Explanations concentrated on the congregation itself, asking what they needed to change in order to attract more women. The fact that the congregations were mostly built up and attended more by men than by women led to a male-focused culture and male-centered power structures. This resulted in a group led mostly by men, expressing interests of gays rather than lesbians, and sometimes using anti-feminist or sexist agendas.²⁶² For Wilcox, the consequence is that “ethnographers have been studying not LGBT religiosities but gay religiosities.”²⁶³ In her inter-faith study, she interviewed those women who chose not to join LGBT communities and asked them in what they believed. She examines three groups of women leaving organized religion: The first group contains women who left religion early before LGBT congregations emerged. Wilcox argues that there were other reasons for leaving than their sexuality: The position of women was considered inferior, women's rights in traditional religions were usually limited. When the women explored their

²⁵⁸ Cf. BCCR, Box 26, Folder 1, 'Translation of "A Synagogue for Gays" (Doreet Grey, HaAretz, May 25, 1979) by Jonathan Frey.

²⁵⁹ Cf. Faderman, Timmons, 2006, p. 264.

²⁶⁰ Wilcox, Melissa M. (2005): "A Religion of One's Own. Gender and LGBT Religiosities," in: *Gay Religion*, ed. by Edward R. Gray and Scott Thumma. Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York et al., pp. 203–220, p. 203.

²⁶¹ For gay outreach synagogues especially Shokeid, 2003, pp. 174–182 and Shokeid, Moshe (2001): "'The Women Are Coming': The Transformation of Gender Relationships in a Gay Synagogue," in: *Ethnos*. Vol. 6, Issue 2, pp. 5–26.

²⁶² Cf. Wilcox, 2005, pp. 204–205.

²⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 205.

sexual desires, organized religion was not an important force in their lives anymore.²⁶⁴ The second group stayed in their religious communities in which they were raised, for different, mostly personal reasons. They denied or concealed their sexual orientation, sometimes trying to reform the communities from within.²⁶⁵ Others switched denominations or traditions to find a more open, welcoming atmosphere (for instance from an Orthodox to a Reform congregation) but did not join a gay outreach synagogue.²⁶⁶ In the matter of believing, Wilcox met struggling women who tried to conciliate traditional religious teachings and religious communities in general with their own desires. Others were seeking religion and spirituality, respectively. And yet others felt that the Divine did not accept them with their sexuality but helped them to come out.²⁶⁷ Wilcox concludes that a more complex melange of factors leads to male-dominated congregations, acknowledging that women have specific reasons for not joining (while not denying that men have their own or similar reasons as well).²⁶⁸ BCC is an example of another assumption: A female leader like Janet Marder is more likely to bring women into a congregation. She generally doesn't drive men away; the same appears to be true with the lay leadership.²⁶⁹

The gender issue cannot be neglected when dealing with gay outreach synagogues. They must be taken into consideration in order to understand the early decisions, relationships, and the atmosphere inside the congregation. Mostly male-centered structures lead to the tendency to write a predominately *gay* history. Therefore, it is important to take female, lesbian voices into account.

²⁶⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 210–211.

²⁶⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 212–213.

²⁶⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 213–214.

²⁶⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 214–217.

²⁶⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 219.

²⁶⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 218.

4 Applying for Membership into the *Union of American Hebrew Congregations*

From its first moments on, the synagogue directed itself towards Reform Judaism. The choice seems to have been opportunistic in the sense that the temple was expected to grow within a denomination, rather than outside and that the congregation would benefit from funding and structural organization offered by the Union. But the UAHC's Pacific Southwest Council was cautious about the debate that a mainly gay synagogue would inevitably cause. This is the reason why the Council wanted to approach the topic carefully and without too much exposure. Rabbi Herman offered his support but wanted to be sure that the congregation acted responsibly before acquiring the membership of the Union.²⁷⁰

However, the fire at MCC in January 1973 brought the issue of the newly founded temple for homosexuals to broader, nationwide attention. Since its ties with the Union were mentioned in every article on the BCC, the Union received a number of negative reactions from member congregations.²⁷¹ Rabbi Alexander Schindler, then vice president of the UAHC, addressed the issue during a Board of Trustees' meeting on February 8, 1973. It was the first time that the lay leadership in the Union was informed about BCC and its outreach to Jewish homosexuals.²⁷² In his speech, Schindler justified Rabbi Herman's support since it was the Union's obligation to help any group of Jews that wanted to form a religious community. He discussed the current psychological opinions regarding homosexuality and insisted that the desire of homosexuals to form an own congregation was valid and should be respected.²⁷³ Although he supported the general idea of a gay outreach synagogue joining Reform Judaism, he noted that the issue had to be resolved "at the highest level of our Union,"²⁷⁴ in the

²⁷⁰ Cf. Hertz, 2008, p. 41.

²⁷¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁷² Cf. *ibid.*

²⁷³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 53–54.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

knowledge that BCC would soon be officially applying for membership. With his speech, Schindler encouraged a debate about homosexuality, something that had never happened before in the Reform Movement.²⁷⁵ As far as Schindler's reasoning went, an eventual admission of BCC would be achieved more easily with more knowledge about homosexuality within the Union's congregations. Additionally, he underlined his support for rabbis in their attempt to help BCC, knowing that other interested groups, following BCC's example, had already contacted the Union.²⁷⁶ At the end of his speech, Schindler laid out four relevant questions which the Union would be confronted within the near future:

- 1.) Should the Union encourage the formation of congregations with outreach to homosexuals? Or should homosexuals be urged to integrate themselves into existing congregations?
- 2.) Is a rabbi obligated to serve such a congregation?
- 3.) In the case of the membership application by those congregations, should the Union accept them?
- 4.) And, which is even more surprising in the year 1973, Schindler already saw a link between gay outreach congregations and the future question of gay marriage. He asked whether marriage ceremonies or other kinds of affirmation ceremonies could be conducted for same-sex couples.²⁷⁷ In view of the fact that Reform Judaism only officially accepted same-sex marriages in 2000, this inquiry appears very progressive and ahead of its time.

²⁷⁵ In fact, Alexander Schindler became a strong advocate for queer issues in his position as UAHC's president (1973–1996). During his tenure, a number of gay outreach synagogues became part of the UAHC, the Union spoke out publicly for the decriminalization of sodomy laws and for the legal protection of homosexuals. Schindler responded to the AIDS crisis, lobbied for the admission of gay and lesbian rabbinical students at HUC-JIR, and took a stance on national debates about gay rights. He also paved the way for mainstream congregations to welcome queer Jews in their rows. He became a “consoler, compatriot, and compassionate ally” (cf. Moers Wenig, Margaret (2007): “Tribute to Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler (1995),” in: *Kulanu: All of Us. A Program and Resource Guide for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Inclusion. Revised and Expanded Edition*, ed. by Richard F. Address, Joel L. Kushner, and Geoffrey Mitelman. New York, pp. 241–244).

²⁷⁶ Cf. Hertz 2008, p. 55.

²⁷⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 56.

As a result of these questions in front of the Board of Trustees, the UAHC called for a more profound study of the questions. So, Schindler sent out a confidential letter to a number of Reform Jewish thinkers, asking them for a theological perspective on the issue. It was Schindler who decided whom to send these letters to – taking the addressees already mentioned commitment to civil rights issues into consideration. He attached an article about BCC in the *Jewish Post & Opinion* to the letter.²⁷⁸ One of the addressees was Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof, Reform Judaism's most prominent *poseq*. Even though Schindler already received his answer at the end of February,²⁷⁹ he wrote a more formal *she'elah* to Rabbi Freehof when he became president-elect of the Union in June 1973. With this *she'elah*, Schindler made the issue of BCC, and gay outreach synagogues in general, official and initiated a broader debate. The question was:

“A rabbi on the West Coast, the Regional Director of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, has organized a congregation of homosexuals. He has said: These are people facing their own situation. They have become a social grouping. Is it in accordance with the spirit of Jewish tradition to encourage the establishment of a congregation of homosexuals?”²⁸⁰

This *she'elah* led to responses by other rabbis and two psychiatrists. Later, shortly before the decision about BCC's application, Schindler even asked the CCAR for their opinion. In total, there exist eleven²⁸¹ *responsa* regarding a possible admission of a gay outreach synagogue into the Union, in reaction to the work and aspiration of BCC. The term “*responsa*” refers to “answers to questions of Jewish law and observance written by *halakhic*

²⁷⁸ Cf. American Jewish Archives (further AJA), Eugene Mihaly Papers, Series E, Folder 7. MS-739, Confidential letter to Rabbi Eugene Mihaly.

²⁷⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, Erwin Herman Papers, Box 1, Folder 28. MS-822, Second letter to Alexander Schindler by Solomon B. Freehof, March 5, 1973.

²⁸⁰ Freehof, Solomon B. (1973): “A Responsum,” in: *CCAR Journal*. Vol. XX, No. 3, Issue No. 82, pp. 31–33, p. 31.

²⁸¹ After careful consideration, work in the archives, and conversations with archivists, eleven written replies are retraceable. Since Schindler's communication with rabbis around the country could have been forgotten somehow, it is possible that there were more replies than documented. Therefore, this thesis cannot claim to project completeness in this matter.

scholars in reply to inquiries addressed to them; the role of *responsa* is similar to that of case law.²⁸² The *responsa* in our case represent the idea of *responsa* as a “general exchange of opinion in *halakhab*”²⁸³ – the term *responsa* is used here in its broadest meaning.

Even though Reform Judaism traditionally rejects the *halakhib* framework, individual rabbis and various committees continued the debate on *halakhab* and wrote *halakhib* decisions. They argued that Reform Judaism had “a series of observances that should be taken seriously.”²⁸⁴ Especially from the 1950s on, *responsa* became more popular among Reform rabbis. However, they formulated their decisions as a voluntary choice rather than as an obligation.²⁸⁵ It is common to ask other people who gain their authority through their expertise rather than their religious function for an evaluation on a *halakhib* issue.

The *responsa* in this case reflect the first comprehensive discussion on the issue of homosexual Jews in Reform Judaism,²⁸⁶ initiated by Alexander Schindler. Therefore, they will be analyzed in the following with regard to their arguments and perceptions of alternative, non-heterosexual lifestyles.

4.1 “Homosexuality is a grave sin:” Opposing BCC’s Admission

As part of Schindler’s inquiry, six *responsa* were written by renowned rabbis, one psychiatrist, and later from the CCAR opposing the admission of

²⁸² Fram, Edward (1997): “Responsa,” in: *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, ed. by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder (editors in chief). Oxford, New York, 1997, pp. 581–583, p. 581.

²⁸³ Tal, Shlomo (2007): “Responsa,” in: *Encyclopaedia Judaica. Second Edition. Volume 17, Ra–Sam*, ed. by Fred Skolnik (editor in chief) and Michael Berenbaum (executive editor). Detroit, New York, San Francisco et al., pp. 228–239, p. 229.

²⁸⁴ Kaplan, 2009, p. 119.

²⁸⁵ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁸⁶ Until then, only a resolution by the NFTS, passed in 1965 during its 25th Biennial Assembly, called for an end to the harassment of homosexuals and for a decriminalization of consensual homosexual relationships (cf. Resolution of the Women of Reform Judaism National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods 25th Biennial Assembly, 1965: Homosexuality, in: *Kulann: All of Us. A Program and Resource Guide for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Inclusion. Revised and Expanded Edition* (2007), ed. by Richard F. Address, Joel L. Kushner, and Geoffrey Mitelman. New York, 2007, p. 247).

congregations for homosexuals into the Union. Among them was *poseq* Solomon Freehof who had already opposed homosexuality in a *responsum* in 1969 in regard to traditional Jewish literature.²⁸⁷ Dr. Eugene Mihaly and Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz, both professors at HUC-JIR, shared Freehof's estimation. Rabbi Joseph R. Narot from the Temple Israel of Greater Miami and civil rights activist first opposed with a decisive article in his temple's bulletin but later questioned his own conclusion. Psychiatrist Alan A. Lipton, also from Miami, tried to justify his rejection with scientific evidence which proved that homosexuals should be regarded as mentally ill.²⁸⁸

The opposition by Freehof did not come as a surprise. Already in 1969, he states, there is only little evidence to be found in Jewish law regarding homosexuality. However, what little evidence there is, is unambiguous: Homosexual acts (between males) are considered an abomination and as punishable by death in the Bible, in the Talmud, and in later rabbinical literature. Another tendency points toward the Talmud and *Shulchan Aruch* seeming to be certain that Jews are not under the suspicion of homosexuality. Therefore, two males are not forbidden to be alone together. Freehof summarizes that the paucity of biblical and post-biblical law would speak for the "normalcy and the purity of the Jewish people."²⁸⁹

In his *responsum*, which he first sent to Alexander Schindler in late February but which was later published in the *CCAR Journal* of summer 1973, Freehof substantiates the *halakhic* grounds. He strongly opposes Rabbi Herman, who in the *Jewish Post & Opinion* article said that "from the Reform point of view, we cannot say we are bound by Halachah [sic]."²⁹⁰

²⁸⁷ Cf. Freehof, Solomon B. (1969): *Current Reform Responsa*. Cincinnati, pp. 236–238.

²⁸⁸ Lipton's *responsum* was published in June 1973. It has to be noted in this context that only in December of the same year, the *American Psychological Association* (APA) voted to remove homosexuality from their list of psychological disorders. Two more years later, the APA released a public statement that homosexuality could not be regarded as a mental disorder and called for all professionals to remove the stigma of homosexuality as a mental illness (cf. American Psychological Association (2009): *Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation*. Washington, p. 23).

²⁸⁹ Freehof, 1969, p. 238.

²⁹⁰ AJA, Eugene Mihaly Papers, Series E, Folder 7. MS-739, Confidential letter to Rabbi Eugene Mihaly.

Ritual and ceremonial laws of Scripture might not be binding, but more certainly the ethical attitudes and judgments of the Bible are.²⁹¹ In his view, Jews kept away from homosexual practices which were common in the Near East. Therefore, the prohibition of homosexuals acts was not only a biblical law but a “deep-rooted way of life of the Jewish people.”²⁹² Men who practice those acts have undoubtedly to be considered sinners.²⁹³ Freehof’s explanations concentrate subsequently on the question of whether sinners should be forced into separate congregations or if they should be included and accepted in existing congregations. Freehof is convinced that it is forbidden to force sinners out of congregations. Sinners even are a necessary part of a congregation; noble people would become too arrogant and self-satisfied without them.²⁹⁴ He alleges that homosexuals exclude themselves from their home congregations. “Mainstream synagogues” could not exclude anyone since it was forbidden by Jewish tradition to do so. He misrepresents the reasons why homosexual Jews wanted to build their own congregations: In reality, they did not feel recognized with their religious needs and did not feel included in traditional synagogues. Instead, Freehof asks why homosexuals want to “commit the further sin”²⁹⁵ of separating and building own congregations. He suspects two reasons: First, with their liberation movement, homosexuals would show that they wanted to get formal recognition as a (sub)group. Admitting them would “bolster their propaganda for other rights.”²⁹⁶ Secondly, homosexual Jews would use the synagogues to get to know each other and to find sexual partners as they did in separate bars and saloons. Supporting those spaces would mean to aid and abet the sinners: “To isolate them into a separate congregation and thus increase their mutual availability is certainly wrong.”²⁹⁷ For all these reasons, the question of homosexual marriages did not need to be

²⁹¹ Cf. Freehof, 1973, p. 31.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

discussed further.²⁹⁸ Freehof demonstrates with his *responsum* that he was not willing to move away from the *halakbic* grounds. On the contrary, he tried to prove that homosexuals had to be regarded as double sinners by trying to disobey the prohibition of separating sinners from the Jewish community.

In his *responsum*, Dr. Eugene Mihaly also refers to the traditional, *halakbic* arguments against homosexuality (and, contrary to Freehof, he explains the *halakbic* grounds on lesbianism which is only covered in post-biblical literature). Mihaly agrees with Rabbi Herman that Reform Judaism is not bound to *halakbab*, but:

“[W]e are obligated to confront our tradition, to struggle with it [...] discover a guiding principle which will help us in determining our attitude toward contemporary problems.”²⁹⁹

For Mihaly, the historical experience of the Jewish people cannot be dismissed and has to be a point of reference in Reform Judaism’s attitude.³⁰⁰

As Mihaly explains, the *halakbab* bases its condemnation of homosexuality on two assumptions: First, homosexuals are sinners who have consciously chosen to violate the law of God. Second, the Jewish people distinguish and separate themselves from their neighbors with a prohibition of homosexual acts. Mihaly acknowledges that, from today’s point of view, the homosexual is not a “willful, volitional rebel.”³⁰¹ Homosexuals would not choose their sexuality – they were born this way or became homosexual during childhood or adolescence.³⁰² Therefore, a homosexual has to be considered an *anus*, somebody who is forced by something outside his or her control (in this case their wrongful homosexual desires), and not as a sinner. An *anus* has to be treated with sympathy, consideration and kindness. Since another *halakbic* category would apply to the homosexuals

²⁹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁹⁹ AJA, Eugene Mihaly Papers, Series E, Folder 7. MS–739, *Responsum on Homosexuality*, p. 3.

³⁰⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁰² Cf. *ibid.*

as *anus*, the *halakhab* itself has to be applied as well.³⁰³ Mihaly elaborates eight conclusions from this observation, though certainly not by “jumping on every avant garde [sic] bandwagon merely to be ‘with it’.”³⁰⁴ 1.) An *anus* needs to be treated as the victim of their behavior and has to be accepted with sympathetic understanding like somebody who suffers from a handicap or an illness.³⁰⁵ 2.) However, if a person chooses homosexual activities out of lust in a form of willful experimentation, he or she has to be considered a sinner.³⁰⁶ 3.) Mihaly thinks that children can be seduced into homosexuality. Therefore, it is necessary to protect children from homosexual seduction by civil law.³⁰⁷ 4.) When Reform Judaism presumes that homosexuals are neither sinners nor unclean or depraved, they can join any congregation. Then, they should receive the same kindness as everyone else joining a synagogue, due to their social stigma even earn “an extra measure of compassion.”³⁰⁸ Mihaly calls for adequate preparation of congregations to accept homosexuals, even in rabbinical education.³⁰⁹ 5.) He acknowledges that any group of Jews has the right to form a congregation. But this would not apply for a congregation which chooses homosexuality as a membership criterion. Neglecting that BCC also welcomes heterosexual members and doesn’t bind the membership to being homosexual, Mihaly states that homosexuals could participate fully in larger congregations. He admits that homosexuals face social problems, but so do other groups. Those problems cannot be a reason to form a separate congregation. Mihaly can picture special interest groups for homosexuals within synagogues, but the isolation of homosexuals in separate congregations is not conceivable.³¹⁰ 6.) A rabbi should not work in an isolated congregation but should help every Jew in a synagogue for everyone.³¹¹ 7.) The UAHC

³⁰³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁰⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁰⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁰⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁰⁹ Cf. *ibid.*

³¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 8–10.

³¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

should therefore not accept a homosexual congregation, and 8.) a homosexual marriage is absurd to talk about.³¹²

Mihaly illustrates that a conceptual difference should be taken into account when considering the case of homosexuals. Whereas Freehof insisted on the stigma of the sinner, Mihaly noted that a homosexual regarded as an *anus* implies another, more welcoming treatment in the synagogues. But Mihaly's overall conclusion is nevertheless negative: Homosexuals should be integrated, not isolated, their problems acknowledged and approached. Hence, synagogues like BCC were not eligible to join the UAHC.

Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz assumed a more confrontational standpoint. He presumes that the homosexuals of BCC would not desire technical aid by the UAHC rather than by seeking "some measure of formal Jewish acceptance."³¹³ Borowitz argues that many conflicts in modern science regarding human sexuality remain and that at the time of his *responsum* it is not possible to conclude that homosexuality is just another way of being. He prefers "while awaiting further data, to operate l'chaf z'chut [sic], to grant, for the sake of argument, the maximal, personalist claim."³¹⁴ In his opinion, not everything which is good for people as persons should be permitted to Jews. A Jew, in Borowitz' view, is a person who lives on terms set by God's covenant, and with a strong relationship to the history of the Jewish people. The question of whether to accept homosexuals is therefore not only a question of enabling people to express themselves but of whether homosexuality is a way of life which is compatible with the covenant.³¹⁵ And the "Jewish continuity through time is fundamental to faithfulness to the Covenant."³¹⁶ Hence, a homosexual Jew has to assure oneself of the position inside the Jewish peoplehood and has to consider his or her choice for the sake of the Jewish community. For Borowitz, the

³¹² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

³¹³ AJA, The Alexander M. Schindler Papers, Box 4, Folder 8. MS–630, Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz, *Responsum*, May 9, 1973, p. 1.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

rejection of homosexuality as a distinction from the Israelite neighbors is still valid today. Hence, homosexuality could not receive an equal status when Judaism is considered to be a life under the covenant.³¹⁷ Borowitz acknowledges that those were Jewish ideals and the reality is changing, but he would not believe that the growing numbers of homosexual Jews (more precisely, the growing number of Jews who have the courage to come out) could cause his views to change. It's not surprising that Borowitz strongly rejects the notion of the UAHC encouraging homosexuals to build congregations. Neither should already existing congregations be admitted to the Union.³¹⁸ Rabbis should not invest their resources in those congregations as well, because Judaism should not encourage homosexuality in any way.³¹⁹ This is also why homosexual marriages may not be conducted. Borowitz sees just another frantic request for official Jewish recognition in the question of marriage.³²⁰

Despite his radical opposition, Borowitz cannot condemn the efforts to help other Jews to feel more and be more Jewish. Hence, he is “against vigorous acts of condemnation and protest of such homosexual Jewish congregations as come into being on their own.”³²¹ He calls for openness towards Jewish homosexuals as persons since it's laudable for any Jew to live in accordance with the covenant.³²²

Borowitz represents those voices in Reform Judaism who resisted acknowledging homosexuals and their request of building their own “safe spaces.” Moreover, he did not see any need for action in order to enhance the (legal) status of homosexuals. Borowitz stuck to his opinion for a long time, most notably during the decision of accepting openly homosexual rabbis in 1990. He refused to sign the *smikbot* of those rabbis. Towards the end of his life, Borowitz conceived that his conviction caused a “great deal

³¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 4.

³¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 5.

³¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 6.

³²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³²² Cf. *ibid.*

of pain to people who were homosexual.”³²³ So, he belatedly started signing *smikhot* (among them the *smikhab* of BCC’s senior rabbi Lisa Edwards) after he noticed that the congregations had welcomed and embraced their homosexual rabbis.³²⁴

Rabbi Joseph R. Narot, civil rights activist from Miami and therefore in Schindler’s eyes an eligible addressee for a *halakhic* question regarding homosexuals, wrote an answer with a seemingly distinct opinion on February 19, 1973:

“I feel that if any two people wish to live together, that is their problem, but I could never get myself to bless in any way a homosexual ‘marriage’. I therefore feel that the Union should not accept such congregations. It should rather encourage these people to join other congregations.”³²⁵

He attached a copy of his temple’s bulletin in which he discusses his appraisal further: Narot had consulted the two *responsa* by Freehof and Mihaly. He acknowledges the desire of homosexuals to be accepted and no longer be punished by laws or societal attitudes: “[N]ormalcy includes a broad spectrum of human conditions.”³²⁶ Narot calls for a softer stance towards homosexuals. He agrees with modern psychology that homosexuality is not curable and there may be factors who cause or prevent it. Hence, he is against any “punitive laws and hypocritical attitudes by society.”³²⁷ After all, he sees himself as a product of his heritage, which is why he cannot bless homosexual marriages nor accept a homosexual congregation as a member of the UAHC. One should adhere to the traditional synagogue.³²⁸

³²³ Maimin, Rachel M. (2014): “Interview with Rabbi Eugene B. Borowitz,” in: *The Sacred Encounter: Jewish Perspectives on Sexuality*, ed. by Lisa J. Grushcow. New York, pp. 305–313, p. 309.

³²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 307–308.

³²⁵ AJA, Erwin Herman Papers, Box 1, Folder 28. MS–822, first letter to Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler by Joseph R. Narot, February 15, 1973.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, Bulletin note “Should Reform Judaism Sponsor Homosexual Congregations?,” March 1973.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

³²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

Interestingly, a few months later, Narot wrote another letter to Alexander Schindler in which he stated to be dissatisfied with his earlier conclusion in the bulletin. He had talked with a lot of people and had put a lot of thought into the basic question, resulting in a change of mind:

“I might be persuaded to vote for leaving the homosexual congregation as a separate congregation within the Union.”³²⁹

This proves that many Reform rabbis had to deal with an ambiguity in this matter: On the one hand the empathy for the position of homosexuals, on the other the attachment to Jewish traditions and customs. In Rabbi Narot’s case, talking with people, with those affected eventually changed his attitude.

Psychologist Alan A. Lipton published his *responsum* in the *CCAR Journal* of summer 1973, together with Rabbi Freehof. He pathologizes homosexuality, as it was still quite common practice at the beginning of the 1970s. According to him, whether a separate congregation of homosexuals should be accepted is just one example for the ongoing conflict between motivational needs and personal responsibility in Western society, as seen with the question on the criminal ability of a person and whether an offender is criminally responsible for his deeds or mentally ill.³³⁰

In his opinion, homosexuality has to be generally considered in the context of neurosis. He uses psychoanalytic theory with its concept of miscarried repair in order to understand homosexuality as a physiologic disease. Homosexual patterns of sexual satisfaction would fulfill “all requirements of unconscious fears, inhibitions and miscarried repairs.”³³¹ As an example, he states that many homosexuals would choose sexual partners of their own sex because they would fear the genitals of the opposite sex. And since psychological miscarried repair is considered an illness, people who became homosexuals due to their unconscious fears have to be necessarily ill. Further, according to Lipton, the question to address is whether

³²⁹ Ibid., second letter to Alexander Schindler by Joseph R. Narot, April 6, 1973.

³³⁰ Cf. Lipton, Alan A. (1973): “A Congregation of Emotionally Ill?” in: *CCAR Journal*. Vol. XX, No. 3, Issue No. 82, pp. 49–50, p. 49.

³³¹ Ibid., p. 50.

a group of emotionally-ill people should form their own congregation.³³² Implicitly, he rejects this notion.

Lipton goes on that one could assume that there are also non-neurotic homosexual patterns without a background of learned fear. “[B]ehavioral, identificatory or even mysterious chemical aberrations”³³³ could cause homosexual desires as well. But then, Lipton argues, one has to ask whether it is worth allowing different congregations for different sexual lifestyles. They could one day overwhelm the traditional synagogues in numbers.³³⁴

Lipton argues in his *responsum* that homosexuals are more ill than capable of making their own, responsible decisions. They are, in a way, like criminals who cannot be judged because of their physiologic condition. Therefore, bringing them together as ill people in a separate synagogue would not be a suitable solution for them.

Prior to the decision about BCC’s membership into the UAHC, Alexander Schindler asked the CCAR for its opinion on this issue. The Executive Board installed an “ad hoc committee on homosexual congregations” with Rabbi Jack Stern as its chairman. It should prepare a recommendation for further considerations of the Executive Board. Their report was published after the 85th annual CCAR convention.³³⁵ The committee had to consider two major points: First, Jewish homosexuals who looked to participate in Judaism but could not find a place in “straight” congregations and were rejected or humiliated by their families and/or the Jewish community. The committee recognized this development and underlined that every Jew should find their place within existing congregations. Secondly, the acceptance of BCC into the UAHC. Such a decision would mean to officially sanction homosexuality. But the committee considered this lifestyle as “contrary to the essential spirit of Judaism,

³³² Cf. *ibid.*

³³³ *Ibid.*

³³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*

³³⁵ Cf. Stern, Jack (1974): “Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Homosexual Congregations,” in: Central Conference of American Rabbis. Eighty-Fifth Annual Convention. March 13th to March 18th Nineteen Hundred And Seventy-Four. Jerusalem, Israel, ed. by Joseph B. Glaser and Elliot L. Stevens. New York, pp. 28–29.

including Reform Judaism.”³³⁶ A congregation of homosexuals would undermine the family-oriented structure of other member congregations of the UAHC, and therefore not stand for the continuity of Judaism.³³⁷ Consequently, the committee declined the idea of accepting such congregations into the Union. Rather, the UAHC should evolve programs to increase the sensitivity to homosexuality to allow for homosexuals to be accepted in “straight congregations.” If homosexuals wanted to build their own congregations, they could do so, but the UAHC should only offer its assistance in creating worship opportunities, not conceding membership.³³⁸ However, the latter still encouraged rabbis like Erwin Herman and reinforced American Reform Judaism’s conception of the obligation to help every Jewish group in its desire to worship.

The arguments against the admission of homosexual congregations were various. Opponents saw homosexuality as being against Jewish tradition *per se*. They differed on how homosexuals should to be regarded: either as sinners, who either had to be part of the congregation and remain silent about their desires, or as *amms*, who were forced by other circumstances to behave as they did. An associated question was how homosexuals were regarded in terms of psychology. Whether they were considered ill or they could choose their sexual desires, homosexuals would actively transgress Jewish law. In any case, the admission of BCC or any other gay outreach synagogue would officially sanction a matter that could not be justified by Jewish tradition. Supplementary arguments noted that homosexual congregations would contradict the family-centered structure of a synagogue and would not contribute to the continuity of Judaism. Opponents called for an integration of homosexuals in traditional synagogues. Some of them acknowledged that the current social standing of homosexuals required special treatment in synagogues, or that congregations had to be trained in order to integrate them properly. Others did not see any need for action or even blamed the homosexuals for secluding themselves. But as Rabbi Narot’s example shows, personal contact could sometimes make

³³⁶ Stern, 1974, p. 28.

³³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

³³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 29.

opponents change their minds. However, there were others who rejected these arguments against a congregation of homosexuals and wrote *responsa* that were the first widely circulating documents within 20th century Judaism to support homosexual Jews in their needs.

4.2 “Leave the decision to the homosexuals:” Supporting BCC’s Admission

Five *responsa* can be identified that supported BCC’s admission into the UAHC. They reflect the current situation of homosexuals in Jewish congregations and came to the conclusion that homosexuals were not fully accepted in mainstream congregations and that, therefore, homosexuals should be encouraged to establish their own synagogues. These *responsa* notably came from Los Angeles: Erwin Herman, BCC’s “founding rabbi,” Stanford Ragins, and Leonard I. Beerman reflected their own experiences with BCC. Judd Marmor, a well-known psychiatrist from Los Angeles and early advocate for the rights of homosexuals, gave an insight into his scientific work. Another *responsum* is traceable, composed by Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn from Boston, the former president of the CCAR.

In his *responsum*, first transmitted to Schindler and then published in the *CCAR Journal*, Rabbi Erwin Herman gives a short overview of BCC’s history and he defends his approach to help any Jewish group in forming a synagogue of its own. It was a matter of principle for the Pacific Southwest Council of the UAHC.³³⁹ Further on, Herman reports about the difficulties of finding a rabbi for the first High Holiday services in 1972:

“Several [rabbis] [...] noted candidly that the distance between ‘Rabbi of the Homosexual Temple’ and ‘Homosexual Rabbi of the Temple’ was too slim to permit their participation.”³⁴⁰

This illustrates the hostile environment Rabbi Herman and the members of BCC had to deal with when introducing the congregation to a larger Jewish audience. However, one year (and a lot of persuading) later,

³³⁹ Cf. Herman, 1973, p. 34.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

a number of rabbis and cantors would now volunteer to conduct services, and the leaders of the Pacific Southwest Council of the UAHC were fully supportive of BCC.³⁴¹

Rabbi Herman explains how the congregation experienced the same hardships as any other young synagogue. These included tensions between traditionalism and non-traditionalism, acceptance or rejection of non-Jews, and the question of a rigid or fluid constitution. Financial problems were limited but still present. Herman acknowledges the BCC's leaders' inexperience but attests to their maturity, intelligence, and devotion to handling the group's heterogeneity.³⁴²

Another part of Herman's *responsum* deals with the social perception of homosexual Jews.³⁴³ BCC's members were certain that the problems of the gay community could only be resolved when the community itself was served by gays (e.g. rabbis), no matter how sincere straight people offered their help. Others even considered this help suspicious, since the straight world – including the Jewish community – had abused and rejected homosexuals.³⁴⁴ According to Herman, this rejection did not change the inner connection of BCC's members to Judaism or the synagogue as an institution. On the contrary, a homosexual synagogue brought them closer to the Jewish tradition. A coming out in a predominantly heterosexual congregation might jeopardize a homosexual's social and economic status and invite the risk of further harassment. BCC, on the other hand, would enable them to share the “warmth of life, of love”³⁴⁵ with other Jews.

Herman recalls conversations with gay people and professionals who work in the homosexual community, coming to the conclusion that homosexuality is not a choice. Despite condemning homosexuality as a sin or abomination (which, in his view, is an ethical infraction rather than a legal one in Jewish tradition), one should accept a person's sexuality as a human

³⁴¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁴² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 36.

³⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

³⁴⁴ Herman also mentions that membership in BCC would not require the self-identification with homosexuality. There were also some heterosexual members, him included, who engaged in the Friday evening services (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 35–36).

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

condition that demands a positive response, with neither rejection nor pity.³⁴⁶

Additionally, the *responsum* covers another topic often raised by BCC's opponents: the question of whether the synagogue is a place for families, especially with children. Herman first rejects the second notion: Reform Judaism would not require children for a membership. Secondly, Herman states that a traditional synagogue would also welcome widows, widowers, divorcees, and singles. Then, he discusses, in an argumentation found in 21st century debates, the term "family." The traditional meaning of the family, a married heterosexual couple with children, is confronted with other concepts: Heterosexual couples without marriage, temporary relationships, marriages or relationships without children, children in divorced marriages, single parents. Herman even raises the question of how to handle communes and their concept of love sharing, with sometimes children coming out of those relationships. Eventually, Herman states that homosexuals have loving families as well and sometimes try to adopt children.³⁴⁷ He, therefore, persuasively refutes the family-based argument against congregations for homosexuals by showing how traditions can change over the centuries.

Finally, Herman underlines that BCC's members think they can address their needs best in a synagogue of their own. They would prefer to be accepted and included in existing synagogues, but this seems to be just impossible. With their own synagogue, they hope to demonstrate the falsehood of the prejudices brought upon them. Consecutively, "[t]hey will happily turn to others when they and we are satisfied that we have conditioned ourselves and our own Temple family to accept their way of life as an alternative life-style, not one that we would impose upon ourselves, but one that we accept as valid for them."³⁴⁸

With his *responsum*, Rabbi Herman, in his position as president of the UAHC's Pacific Southwest Council, demonstrated his devotion to BCC and its members. He put the members and their needs at the center of

³⁴⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁴⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

attention and advocated their success. He succeeded in disproving the opponents' arguments and called for the acceptance of homosexuality as a human condition. Moreover, he sympathized with the homosexuals' desire to take the future into their own hands after being rejected by the straight world for years. This made him a true straight ally of BCC.

Rabbi Sanford Ragins from LBT published his *responsum* in the *CCAR Journal* of summer 1973. It mainly consists of a sermon he presented in May 1973 to BCC which he had already written in April, probably inspired by Schindler's inquiries.³⁴⁹ First, Ragins endorses Rabbi Herman's estimation that BCC had the same problems as every other newborn synagogue, and there was nothing unusual about it.³⁵⁰ After that, he writes about the moving Torah dedication ceremony in March 1973. He acknowledges the double minority status of the group he observed that night: Being Jewish, "part of an old and persecuted people," and being gay, "part of an old and persecuted group, the only group, [...] that it is still possible to hate publicly in America."³⁵¹

What makes this *responsum* so authentic is the depiction of Ragins' personal quest in relation to the issue of homosexuality. When BCC lost its meeting place in MCC, Ragins saw his offer to welcome the congregation into LBT as *bakbnasat orkhim*. But he had second thoughts about whether the congregation had a right to exist and whether tolerating homosexuality itself by supporting BCC.³⁵² Thus, he consulted traditional Jewish literature and its stance on homosexuality. Ragins concluded that tradition can be traced in daily life, in the language, in social attitudes, in legal codes, but "tradition of repression is there also, perhaps most powerfully, inside each of us."³⁵³ But Ragins did not stop there. He also drew on contemporary, scientific literature on the issue. He became impressed by the Kinsey-Report (1953) by Alfred Charles Kinsey that first captured the

³⁴⁹ Cf. BCCR, Box 8, Folder 7 and Folder 10, "Judaism and Homosexuality" by Rabbi Sanford Ragins.

³⁵⁰ Cf. Ragins, Sanford (1973): "An Echo of the Pleas of Our Fathers," in: *CCAR Journal*. Vol. XX, No. 3, Issue No. 82, pp. 41–49, p. 41.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³⁵² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

dimension of homosexual activities among men, other interdisciplinary research, and statistics. He ascertained that these numbers and reports raised a lot of questions and challenged the widely established judgments of society, leading to intensive debates between defenders of the tradition and those who want more openness towards homosexuals.³⁵⁴ According to Ragins, Judaism's stance should be clear in this debate. Jewish tradition is not limited to the texts that condemn homosexuality, it is especially shaped by wandering and suffering. Jews know about repression and barbarism which is perpetuated in the name of established beliefs and opinions. Jews should not enforce one way of living, but should end the discrimination and oppression against the homosexual community.³⁵⁵ The appeals of homosexuals were "an echo of the pleas of our fathers in every place and time."³⁵⁶ In order to take the teachings of Passover seriously, all Jews should work towards the liberation of all slaves.

Accordingly, the desire for synagogues for homosexuals has to be granted, their establishment encouraged, assisted, and membership approved. Until Jews are accepted in their homosexuality, integration into existing synagogues would remain impossible.³⁵⁷ He concludes with an appreciation for the religious commitment of BCC's members:

"[...] I am happy to say that I find an ever-increasing awareness of this [i. e. Jewish] heritage and an ever more intense will to be identified with it joyously and proudly. This, friends, is our direction and our goal."³⁵⁸

Stanford Ragins' story is an example of the inner struggle with the Jewish tradition and the appeals of people in need. He got involved with contemporary debates about homosexuality, welcomed worshipping Jews in his temple regardless of their sexuality, and built up a relationship with them. Out of the Jewish history of repression, oppression, and persecution,

³⁵⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 44–45.

³⁵⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 46.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

Ragins concluded for himself that it was even more Jewish to help those in need than adhering to rigorous prohibitions.

Ragin's colleague at LBT, Leonard I. Beerman, wrote his opinion as a letter to Alexander Schindler. He recognizes that "the answers to the questions you [i. e. Schindler] put to me were so difficult to come by."³⁵⁹ He elucidates that, with the accommodation of BCC in LBT, the question of congregations for homosexuals was not hypothetical, it was a real one for him. His encounters with those affected changed his views and even eliminated his anxiety about homosexuals. Beerman relates here to Rabbi Narot who also questioned his own views after meeting affected people.

However, out of his own experience with BCC, Beerman doesn't conclude that the formation of gay outreach congregations should be encouraged by the Union. Homosexuals should be integrated into existing congregations. He rather pictures specific groups for homosexuals inside "straight congregations" since congregations were already pluralistic. Beerman, however, also acknowledges that homosexuals currently did not feel enough acceptance. That is why his vision would only be imaginable in the future. If homosexuals wanted to form own congregations, the Union should assist them, even though those synagogues should only be "temporary way stations on the way to the acceptance and integration of the future."³⁶⁰ With such temples, both homosexuals and heterosexuals would be able to worship more comfortably. Congregations for homosexuals would help homosexual Jews to enhance their status in the larger Jewish community and at the same time could serve their spiritual needs. Additionally, each rabbi should be free in his or her decision to serve such a congregation. The Union, CCAR, and the HUC-JIR should create an appropriate climate in which rabbis could make their decision without reproach or reprisal from other rabbis or their congregations.³⁶¹

³⁵⁹ AJA, Erwin Herman Papers, Box 1, Folder 28. MS-822, letter from Leonard I. Beerman to Alexander Schindler, March 19, 1973.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Cf. *ibid.*

Congregations of homosexuals should “of course be accepted.”³⁶² He reveals a common contradiction in the Union’s practice: Adulterers and exploiters could unite and form congregations and nobody would hesitate to accept them into the Union. Why should it be otherwise with homosexual Jews then?

In response to Schindler’s question about a Jewish marriage of the same-sex, Beerman admits that such marriages would be too premature, but:

“Yet I envision a time when something like this will be possible. Given the proper circumstances, the maturity of the couple, a sincere commitment to Judaism, I could give some form of blessing to such a union.”³⁶³

At the end of his remarks, Beerman shortly addresses *halakhic* issues. He states that the *halakhab* doesn’t provide any basis for congregations of homosexuals. For him, Jewish values like “compassion, a pity for the living, and a need to work for the correction of the world’s injustice”³⁶⁴ are more important, which leads him to his conclusion to support BCC and the admission of such congregations into the Union. In sum, Beerman envisioned large, comprehensive congregations, but he knew about the specific standing of homosexuals in his time. His encounter with Jewish homosexuals in Los Angeles bolstered his decision making, leading him to believe that there was a need for congregations like BCC, even if just temporarily. One can assume that, for Beerman, supporting homosexuals in their needs would constitute a contribution to *tikkun olam*.

As Beerman, Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn wrote his answer directly to Schindler. In his letter, he admits that the issue of homosexuality is completely new to him. However, he acknowledges that rabbis have the obligation to serve homosexuals and that congregations of homosexuals should be accepted into the Union. Whether the establishment of such congregations should be encouraged, he leaves to the homosexuals to decide: A rabbi should gather homosexuals in his congregation and let them decide

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

whether they want to have a congregation for themselves or whether they want to be integrated into the larger congregation.³⁶⁵ Regarding Schindler's question about the Jewish marriage of homosexuals, Gittelson rejects the notion to perform a traditional Jewish marriage, but he would concede to an individual rabbi to create "a ceremony of some kind that would be meaningful to two such people."³⁶⁶ Gittelson's *responsum* appears to have been a rather spontaneous answer to Schindler's question. However, the answer derived from an acknowledging attitude that concentrated on the needs of homosexuals. Those needs seemed to be more important at the moment than *halakhic* prohibitions and the category of sinners respectively.

Psychiatrist Dr. Judd Marmor, vice-president of the *American Psychological Association* (APA) at the time, published another *responsum* in the *CCAR Journal*. Marmor worked closely with his colleague at the University College Los Angeles, Dr. Evelyn Hooker, and was most influential in removing homosexuality from the APA's list of psychological disorders³⁶⁷ in December 1973. He argues that pathologizing homosexuality is a reflection of cultural values and not based on scientific justifications.³⁶⁸ He shows that homosexuality was and is socially accepted in different communities and that homosexuality cannot be easily considered biologically unnatural. Homosexual behavior can be found everywhere in nature: "Exclusive heterosexuality as well as exclusive homosexuality are unique consequences of human acculturative processes."³⁶⁹

Marmor underlines that other deviations from the "natural" are not necessarily considered psychopathological like rejecting the "natural nourishment" of meat as a vegetarian. Hence, the condemnation of homosexuality out of psychological reasons would reflect "greater moral disapproval."³⁷⁰

³⁶⁵ Cf. AJA, Erwin Herman Papers, Box 1, Folder 28. MS-822, letter from Roland B. Gittelson to Alexander Schindler, February 14, 1973.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁷ Cf. Tarkan, Laurie (December 19, 2003): *Dr. Judd Marmor, 93, Dies; Led Change in View of Gays*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/19/us/dr-judd-marmor-93-dies-led-change-in-view-of-gays.html> (last retrieved March 8, 2019).

³⁶⁸ Cf. Marmor, Judd: (1973) "Pathologic Or Normal?," in: *CCAR Journal*. Vol. XX, No. 3, Issue No. 82, pp. 47–49, p. 47.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

The same would apply to deviations from the cultural mainstream (e.g. astrology or religious sects). Their adherents, mentally disabled or not, are accepted so long as they don't force their beliefs on others.³⁷¹

As with heterosexuals, there are homosexuals with psychological disorders, but Marmor points out that much of them suffer from societies' prejudices and discrimination. He also rejects the widely established opinion that homosexuals become homosexual due to their disturbed family backgrounds. Eventually, all alternative lifestyles would result out of personal and developmental differences.³⁷²

Marmor summarizes that the attitude towards sexual preferences is filled with values "couched in 'medical' and 'scientific' rationalizations."³⁷³ Based on this assumption, the question of separate congregations for homosexuals can only be answered while looking at the Jewish community at large. Since homosexuals are not fully accepted and recognized, it is reasonable to establish separate congregations. Marmor also sees them "as part of a transitional stage."³⁷⁴

In his *responsum*, Marmor reflects new scientific approaches to the issue of homosexuality and considers, contrary to Lipton, a homosexual's standing in an anti-gay society. It's not the homosexual who is ill and deviated, society and its approach to the issue influence their well-being. When society changes, homosexuals will feel accepted and, in a second step, could be integrated into "straight congregations."

The arguments for the admission of congregations for homosexuals put the homosexuals themselves into the center of attention. The proponents took the homosexuals' actual legal, social position, and their individual needs into account. New scientific knowledge provided enough evidence to believe that homosexuality was a natural human condition and not a choice. Rabbis who worked with BCC underlined that the synagogue had the same "pain of a newborn"³⁷⁵ like every other synagogue. Never-

³⁷¹ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁷² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ Herman, 1973, p. 36.

theless, BCC's members were devoted and motivated. They were driven by the desire to come closer to Jewish tradition, becoming even more Jewish. It was also this Jewish heritage, shaped by exclusion and persecution, that would demand acceptance and commitment for other repressed groups like homosexuals. Their exclusion from the straight (Jewish) world would require specific solutions, according to their needs. Their leadership should consist of those affected.

The idea was that congregations of homosexuals would constitute just a temporary station until homosexuals would be widely accepted in Jewish congregations.³⁷⁶ It was assumed that they could enhance their status in the larger Jewish community with these special outreach congregations. Out of their personal experience, the authors knew that only a direct encounter with homosexuals and the examination of their situation could change the Jewish community's deprecating attitude. This appraisal seems to have been justified if we look at what happened when BCC finally submitted its membership application, turning Alexander Schindler's hypothetical inquiry into serious business.

4.3 Admission into the Union of *American Hebrew Congregations*

As intended from its founding on, BCC handed in the application for membership into the UAHC to Rabbi Herman in June 1973.³⁷⁷ Herman was responsible for the development of new congregations in the Pacific

³⁷⁶ In the light of the enduring existence of LGBTQ synagogues, it seems debatable whether this goal has already been achieved today as many commentators suggest. For instance, Steven M. Cohen, director of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive, thinks that acceptance of LGBTQ in straight/mainstream synagogues is given today. Moreover, LGBTQ-identified synagogues would become irrelevant because younger adults would not identify through sexuality anymore. On the other hand, others are of the opinion that specific synagogues for LGBTQ will continue to teach mainstream synagogues how to become more inclusive, for example in creating prayers or ceremonies. According to these voices, those congregations should remain the first reference for LGBTQ inclusion. Additionally, those synagogues are traditionally more dedicated to social action (cf. Lemberger, Martin (March 11, 2013): *Gay Synagogue's Uncertain Future*. <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/126512/gay-synagogues-uncertain-future> (last retrieved April 16, 2019)).

³⁷⁷ Cf. BCCR, Box 1, Folder 3, Minutes of June 14, Board of Directors Meeting.

Southwest Council of the Union. However, he had one condition: BCC had to prove itself a functional congregation before applying for membership.³⁷⁸ This seems to have happened in summer 1973. BCC's leadership trusted Herman that the application would be "submitted at his descretion [sic!] to the board [i.e. Regional Board of the UAHC] when the time is right."³⁷⁹ It was expected that the Regional Board would submit the application to the National Board during their meeting in November.³⁸⁰

However, the congregation did not just passively wait for a decision by the UAHC. Even while the application was being reviewed, events were in train. Already in January 1973, the congregation's leadership was invited by Norman Eichberg to the UAHC Pacific Southwest Council Biennial. Here, the congregation had the chance to meet and connect with various temples in the region and other national leaders of the Union.³⁸¹ The participation of BCC's president Stuart Zinn in the Centennial-Biennial of the UAHC in New York City (November 9–15, 1973) was even more important. The Union had invited one representative of the congregation and BCC sent its president for two reasons: Firstly, for him to observe the working of the convention and secondly, for the promotion of public relations and awareness for the temple.³⁸² According to Zinn, he was successful in observing the planning of resolutions, in coming together with rabbis and temple officers, as well as in addressing the Commission on Social Action on the specific needs of homosexuals. His address resulted in a "promise of action."³⁸³ Zinn also met Alexander Schindler, who was going to be known for supporting BCC's admission to the Union. As he recalls it, Schindler told him: "I hope this is the beginning of a long and fulfilling relationship."³⁸⁴ Later, BCC's board of directors thanked Zinn for

³⁷⁸ Cf. Hertz, 2008, p. 41.

³⁷⁹ BCCR, Box 1, Folder 3, Minutes of June 14, Board of Directors Meeting.

³⁸⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁸¹ Cf. BCCR, Box 8, Folder 18, Welcome Address UAHC Pacific Southwest Council Biennial, January 19, 1973.

³⁸² Cf. Zinn, Stuart (1973): "Presidents Report From New York," in: *Beth Chayim Chadashim Newsletter*. Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 2–3, p. 2.

³⁸³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

the participation in the conference “which resulted in our being voted full members [of the UAHC].”³⁸⁵ Indeed, Zinn succeeded in making temples around the country aware of BCC’s situation and paved the way for the four deciding steps to being recognized as a Reform congregation.

The first step was the Regional New Congregations Committee. It met in early 1974 and discussed BCC’s affiliation “at great length.”³⁸⁶ The committee consisted of twelve individuals, three of them rabbis. The rabbis were selected in order to receive a broad range of opinions in terms of general attitudes, not necessarily on human sexualities. Finally, the Committee voted 11–1 for the admission of BCC to the Union.³⁸⁷ The next step was the Regional Assembly of Delegates. 100 delegates from the Pacific Southwest Region of the Union discussed the issue intensively, with several debates in two-hour forums. In the end, the delegates voted 91–9 in favor of the admission.³⁸⁸

On the regional level, there was overwhelming support for the acceptance of BCC. However, the next hurdle awaited the congregation on a national level. On June 6, 1974, the National New Congregations Committee met to make a decision.³⁸⁹ The Committee was quite small and after a “full airing of the subject,” it voted for the admission with seven in favor and one abstention.³⁹⁰ The ultimate decision was then left to the Executive Committee of the UAHC Board of Trustees, the highest lay leadership of the Reform Movement, during its meeting on June 9, 1974.

The minutes of the meeting reveal the proponents’ and opponents’ lines of argument. As the chairman pointed out at the end, the debate represented “the feeling of the entire officers of the Union.”³⁹¹ Joseph Kleiman, an L. A. based business executive, brought the subject to order.

³⁸⁵ BCCR, Box 1, Folder 3, Board Meeting June 19, 1974.

³⁸⁶ AJA, Erwin Herman Papers, Box 1, Folder 28. MS-822, UAHC Board of Trustees, Executive Committee Proceedings, June 8–9, 1974.

³⁸⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁸⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

³⁸⁹ Cf. Hertz, 2008, p. 66.

³⁹⁰ Cf. AJA, Erwin Herman Papers, Box 1, Folder 28. MS-822, UAHC Board of Trustees, Executive Committee Proceedings, June 8–9, 1974, p. 13.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Just before that, nine other “straight congregations” were accepted to the Union with a plain “Aye.” Kleiman became the main advocate for BCC during the meeting. After shortly resuming the history of the congregation, Kleiman made clear that the regional council of the UAHC would not act precipitously in considering BCC for Union membership. As with all congregations, they wanted to make sure that BCC is “a viable congregation in Israel.”³⁹² BCC had developed quite quickly, so an application could be supported at this point. Kleiman reinforced the notion of the Regional New Congregations Committee that BCC should not be considered a congregation of homosexuals but a normal congregation. It should be judged on whether it fulfilled the UAHC’s membership requirements. The Committee would neither seek for any publicity nor for a national debate about the rightness or wrongness of homosexuality.³⁹³

He went on and shortly rejected the three most common comments against the admission like Rabbi Herman had done in his *responsa*: The *halakhic* arguments sounded vacuous for Reform Judaism, homosexuals could not just integrate into normal synagogues because they felt uncomfortable there, and currently there were not any children (from separated heterosexual relationships) involved in the temple, so no child would be exposed to homosexual behavior.³⁹⁴ Moreover, Kleiman underlined the warm and enriching atmosphere in BCC since the services were very Jewish. The temple was furthermore not only unique because of its members’ sexuality, but because the services were attended by a higher number of people than the number of memberships. And, finally, he made clear that BCC was not an exclusive congregation as many suggested. Heterosexuals were more than welcome to join.³⁹⁵

After Kleiman’s opening statement, the debate opened and various attendees participated. Other proponents spoke in favor of the admission because Reform Judaism should actively work against discrimination. Kivie Kaplan, a businessman and civil rights activist from Boston, reminded the

³⁹² Ibid., p. 12.

³⁹³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

³⁹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

Committee that all humans had been created equal. If the Union would not accept the congregation, they would actively discriminate against them and commit a serious mistake:

“I think we ought to accept this congregation into our fold without making a big thing out of it.”³⁹⁶

Kaplan was supported by others to act against discrimination and to acknowledge that homosexuals were discriminated against by American society and the world’s Jewish community.³⁹⁷ Seymour Sims (Scarsdale, N.Y.) and Judge Emil Baar (Brooklyn) both raised the issue of whether separating homosexual Jews from regular congregations was the right way to go. While Sims feared that a rejection of BCC could force separatism among its members and would, therefore, cause trouble,³⁹⁸ Baar argued that the *halakhab* might prohibit homosexuality, but there were other *mitzvo*t implicitly demanding to take them in. One of these was that Jews should not be separated from the greater people. BCC’s members were Jews, wanted to be Jews, and wanted to affiliate with other Jews.³⁹⁹ Jerome S. Mehlman, president of the UAHC’s Chicago Federation, argued as a physician and emphasized that homosexuality could not easily be considered an abnormality and if so, society could live with this kind of abnormality. In terms of *halakbic* references, Mehlman calls for a consistent approach:

“If we insist that we cannot accept this group on Halachic [sic] principles, we have to make an awful lot of changes in our other activities and our decisions.”⁴⁰⁰

However, one aspect still bothered Mehlman: the question of whether BCC should gain public attention. In his opinion, the congregation would have difficulties existing when it was not to receive renown and to be well advertised.⁴⁰¹ Indeed, this was one of the key aspects of the debate: Should the Union seek wider publicity for the congregation of homosexuals? Kleiman

³⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 24–25.

³⁹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

³⁹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 30–31.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴⁰¹ Cf. *ibid.*

had already rejected that notion in his opening statement, but Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld, then president of the CCAR, expressed skepticism towards that assurance. He did not think that body as large as the UAHC could prevent wide media coverage on the admission of a homosexual congregation and neither could BCC be restrained “from publicising [sic] its homosexual nucleus.”⁴⁰² Kleiman was forced to make clear that BCC did not advertise for members, not to mention recruiting. BCC had only gained limited publicity in Los Angeles and this publicity had been “fairly objective.”⁴⁰³ The congregation had been increasing their audience and memberships by word of mouth as it was common in the repressed gay community. This fact led Kleiman to estimate “that this congregation has a higher percentage of non-recruited affiliates than almost any other temple.”⁴⁰⁴

The opponents to the admission still were not convinced and invoked other arguments. Their strongest speaker was Rabbi Lelyveld. Besides his skepticism about the public coverage of the synagogue, he did not want to recognize homosexuality as normal. He had sympathy for “those who are possessed of that abnormality”⁴⁰⁵ and acknowledged that consenting adults should have sexual rights. He argued again for accepting homosexual individuals into existing congregations. He emphasized that he knew top leaders of the Union, also friends of his, who were gay themselves.⁴⁰⁶ However, he was vehemently opposed to “the structuring of homosexuality into American Jewish communal life.”⁴⁰⁷ He also argued that Reform Judaism had already been struggling with other Jewish denominations over issues like conversion or mixed marriages. The recognition of homosexuality would only add another problem to the list of disputes.⁴⁰⁸ It seems that Lelyveld’s argumentation, as recorded in the minutes, was not compelling. He repeated his arguments multiple times and he ended with an

⁴⁰² Ibid., p. 20.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., p. 28.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴⁰⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴⁰⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

unintelligible comparison between the *kasbrut* laws, adultery, and homosexuality. This led Rabbi Herman to hold off on his intervention:

“Arthur was prone to speak lengthily and he did not fail us. The longer he spoke, however, the more certain I was that he had destroyed his own argument – so I stopped preparing my response.”⁴⁰⁹

Irvin Husin, president of the New York Federation, reported on his negative experiences with a group of homosexuals who wanted to form another gay outreach congregation in New York. Their leadership had not been cooperative at all and simply had not known anything about Judaism. From that perspective, he argued that homosexuals should include themselves and should not cause any more trouble.⁴¹⁰ Nathaniel Hess, another New York delegate, principally agreed on admitting any group of Jews into the Union as members. But he did not want to have the word “homosexual” on the application and would consider an admission without it. His fear was to create all kinds of segregating groups wishing to be accepted by the Union.⁴¹¹

As it becomes obvious, the arguments against the admission were not new. They can already be found in the *responsa* literature. They were mostly rooted in the anxiety to officially accept homosexuality when admitting BCC to the Union. Even the notion that the Union should only decide on the basis of whether BCC as a congregation fulfilled the Union’s requirements did not change that. However, the opponents and their arguments were in the minority on that day. When the chairman called for a vote, BCC was finally admitted to the Union with 61 in favor and 22 opposing. This majority decision emphasized that the lay leadership of Reform Judaism was more ready to accept a congregation of homosexuals than the Reform rabbis. Whereas the CCAR and many noted and influential rabbis opposed in *responsa* and during meetings, some vehemently, the lay leaders through all different levels of the membership affiliation process showed openness and appreciation for the situation of homosexual Jews. BCC and its supporters succeeded

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., letter from Erwin Herman to Amy Beth Hertz, January 16, 2008.

⁴¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, UAHC Board of Trustees, Executive Committee Proceedings, June 8–9, 1974, pp. 31–32.

⁴¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

in persuading those decision makers who kept some distance from biblical traditions and the *halakhab* and were more likely to be confronted with other lifestyles in their daily (non-Jewish) environment. As Amy Hertz correctly points out, BCC's admission was the "only decision vis-à-vis gay and lesbian Jews in the Reform Movement that was decided exclusively among the lay leadership."⁴¹² Later decisions like the admission of gay and lesbian rabbis (1990) and the performance of same-sex marriages (2000) were mostly made by the rabbis⁴¹³ since these decisions touched the core of Jewish life and community building. BCC, however, started the process of internal Jewish self-reform and helped to gradually change the opinion of Reform rabbis, "the guardians of tradition."

A few days later, the congregation received the official letter of its acceptance⁴¹⁴ and during the 2nd anniversary service on July 19, 1974, BCC was officially introduced as Herman officiated the service and handed over the charter to the congregation, in the presence of Norman Eichberg, William G. Israel (Vice President of the UAHC Nation Board of Trustees), and L. A.'s city attorney Burt Pines.⁴¹⁵

With the UAHC's decision, BCC became the first gay and lesbian institution ever to be recognized by an official religious mainstream organization. Even though it was not intended, surely to some degree BCC's admission was a sign of the institutional recognition of homosexuality. For Aliza Maggid, it was "a historic action that cracked open the door of mainstream Judaism to gay and lesbian Jews."⁴¹⁶ And BCC did not stop there. It became further engaged in the improvement of homosexuals' positions in (Reform) Judaism, American society in general, and became a role model for other gay outreach congregations to join the Union.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹² Hertz, 2008, p. 78.

⁴¹³ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴¹⁴ Cf. BCCR, Box 4, Folder 37, UAHC letter to Stuart Zinn.

⁴¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 31, Folder 11, Second Anniversary Service.

⁴¹⁶ Maggid, Aliza (1989): "Joining together: Building a Worldwide Movement," in: *Twice Blessed. On Being Lesbian, Gay, and Jewish*, ed. by Christie Balka and Andy Rose. Boston, pp. 157–170, p. 160.

⁴¹⁷ Three other synagogues had become members of the UAHC by the mid-1980s: Or Chadash (Chicago), Etz Chaim (Miami), and Sha'ar Zahav (San Francisco) (cf. Cooper, 1989, p. 93).

5 Prospects

For BCC's leadership and its members, the admission to the UAHC ensured the congregation's viability in the thicket of American Judaism. Now, they were able to act on the authority of Reform Judaism and to reach out for support more easily, be it financially or using the network of Reform congregations. However, the road toward an end of discrimination against queer Jews, toward an equal legal and religious status, acceptance, and tolerance was still long. This became obvious during the affiliation process, especially due to the heavy rejection by Reform rabbis. As a result, BCC actively connected with other groups of Jewish homosexuals in the United States. As stated in chapter 3.5 *Working towards an Organized Synagogal Structure*, the congregation received a considerable amount of correspondence from other Jews who were in the same social position as BCC's members. Several times, the congregation was asked on how to form a gay outreach synagogue. In November 1973, during the UAHC Biennial, president Stuart Zinn met with CBST, New York's gay outreach synagogue, for the first time. CBST's founding process stretched from February until November of the same year.⁴¹⁸ Zinn saw several parallels in the organizational structure and in their problems, for example in attracting more members.⁴¹⁹ He states:

“I feel they have more people involved with a deeper, more intense knowledge and understanding of Judaism than we have, and they are indeed fortunate to have these people to call upon. In short, they are serious in their desire for a shul in New York City, and are working towards growing and serving their congregation as we are.”⁴²⁰

BCC maintained a strong connection with its counterpart on the East Coast which never affiliated with a Jewish denomination. The synagogue

⁴¹⁸ Cf. Cohen, Ayelet S. (2014): *Changing Lives, Making History: Congregation Beit Simchat Torah. The First Forty Years*. New York, pp. 14–20.

⁴¹⁹ Cf. Zinn, 1973, pp. 2–3.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

even used CBST's expertise in religious questions, for example on a gay-friendly interpretation of the problematical verses *Leviticus 16:1–20:27* that consider homosexual acts an abomination.⁴²¹

Shortly after the admission to the UAHC in August 1974, BCC invited guests from San Francisco and the newly founded gay outreach synagogue Etz Chaim in Miami. The guests reported about attempts to form new temples in Washington, D.C., Cleveland, and Austin. They and other groups, going as far as London and Amsterdam, wanted to get more information on how they could form temples and their organizational structure.⁴²² An important forum for the communication between already existing, new, or potential gay outreach synagogues became the annual Conference of the *Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches*. From the churches of the fellowship emerged many gay outreach synagogues and other gay Jewish gatherings. The conventions in 1974 and 1975 were an opportunity to share experiences among the groups, to offer moral support, and to prepare to form an own, Jewish and homosexual network.⁴²³ The convention also facilitated the knowledge about other gay outreach synagogues among the churches, from whom other Jews could ask help to create their own spaces.⁴²⁴

At the end of 1975, the United Nations General Assembly passed, in response to pressure from Arabic countries, a resolution that “[d]etermines that zionism [sic] is a form of racism and racial discrimination.”⁴²⁵ This caused intensive debates within American Judaism, demanding a response from Jewish groups. Hence, CBST called for a meeting of gay and lesbian Jewish organizations “to develop strategies for combatting anti-Semitism.”⁴²⁶

⁴²¹ Cf. BCCR, Box 8, Folder 21, Sermon on *Leviticus 16:1–20:27*, Beth Simchat Torah May 3, 1974.

⁴²² Cf. BCCR, Box 1, Folder 6, Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Board of Congregation Beth Chayim Chadashim August 20, 1974.

⁴²³ Cf. Cooper, 1989, p. 86.

⁴²⁴ Cf. Krieger, Jerry (1975): “BCC Rep Reports from Dallas. MCC Conference,” in: *Beth Chayim Chadashim Newsletter*. Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 17–19, p. 17.

⁴²⁵ United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3379 (2400th plenary meeting, November 10, 1975), <https://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/5325893.16368103.html> (last retrieved April 15, 2019).

⁴²⁶ Maggid, 1989, p. 160.

Representatives from BCC and from Philadelphia (Beth Ahavah), Boston (B'nai Haskalah), and Washington D.C. (Temple Mishpachah) traveled to New York for the first organized meeting of organizations founded and run by Jewish homosexuals. Their first action was to condemn the U.N. resolution. However, the participants also decided to maintain closer contact with each other and to enhance their mutual support.⁴²⁷ They also laid the groundwork for the *First International Conference of Gay and Lesbian Jews* one year later in Washington, D.C. Here, American congregations were joined by groups from Montreal, Toronto, London, and an Israeli proxy organization (the *Society for the Protection of Personal Rights*). This meeting was the birth of an international organization for homosexual Jews, an “international Gay Hebrew Alliance,”⁴²⁸ that officially became the *World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations* in 1980, today the *World Congress of GLBT Jews*. Resolutions on the first conference established membership standards and determined that the member organizations would hold annual international conferences in a rotational pattern.⁴²⁹ BCC hosted the conference in 1978 and again in 1982. The founding organizations hoped that they would establish a new movement “that would give voice to their concerns and validate their existence as a legitimate segment of Am Yisroel.”⁴³⁰ Aliza Maggid recalls:

“We felt proud together, and we were able to share our concerns in a completely accepting atmosphere. Warm and lasting friendships grew quickly and easily. We attended dozens of workshops on gay and Jewish subjects [...]. We sang, danced, conducted religious services in many alternative forms, and of course enjoyed lots of feasting and festivities.”⁴³¹

But BCC’s dedication was not limited to other queer Jewish organizations. BCC tried to connect with the larger gay community as well, trying to become a bridge between the Jewish and the gay world. Already in 1973,

⁴²⁷ Cf. Cooper, 1989, p. 86.

⁴²⁸ BCCR, Box 22, Folder 6, Conference of Gay Jewish Organizations Minutes of Business Meeting on August 14, 1976.

⁴²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴³⁰ Cooper, 1989, p. 87.

⁴³¹ Maggid, 1989, pp. 160–161.

the temple's vice president participated in a conference in San Francisco and thereby promoted his gay and Jewish identity in front of 600 people with different backgrounds.⁴³² The leadership invited important figures of the local L.A. gay community to speak in front of their congregation and the temple joined different organizations supporting gay rights legislation, like *HELP, Inc.*⁴³³ In 1974, the congregation participated in the Christopher Street West Parade, the annual pride parade in Los Angeles, for the first time.⁴³⁴

Occasionally, BCC sent speakers to L.A. universities to address students in affairs of gay rights. Social and political groups invited BCC members as well as Jewish Community Centers and other community activities,⁴³⁵ including different charity events.⁴³⁶ The congregation's newsletter from 1975 to 1977 attests to an intensive commitment to current issues in the homosexual community in Los Angeles, engaging in protests and supporting gay rights activists. BCC succeeded in not only becoming established among the Jewish community but also in the gay community, at least on a regional level. This recognition led to a more professionalized outreach program with the purpose of educating the straight Jewish communities on homosexuality. This program was designed with the help of Rabbi Allen I. Freehling of the University Synagogue Los Angeles and had influenced the eventual UAHC syllabus on sex education.⁴³⁷

An incident in late 1976 and at the beginning of 1977 shows the intermediate success of BCC's work in an exemplary way. In the editorial of the November 19 edition of the *B'nai Brith Messenger*, a weekly newspaper released by L.A.'s Jewish community, an article on BCC was published. Titled "Company Not to Keep," the anonymous author stated his or her dislike of a temple's representative in the *Jewish Federation Council of Greater*

⁴³² Cf. BCCR, Box 1, Folder 1, Board of Directors Meeting August 16, 1973.

⁴³³ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 3, Folder 31, Monthly Board Meeting September 20, 1973.

⁴³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 5, letter to the congregants May 16, 1974.

⁴³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, Box 4, Folder 5, "Beth Chayim Chadashim – The House of New Life," p. 9.

⁴³⁶ Cf. Cooper, 1989, p. 85.

⁴³⁷ Cf. BCCR, Box 22, Folder 3, Regular Board Meeting May 21, 1977.

Los Angeles. The author thought traditional literature is clear in its view on homosexuality and concludes:

“It seems that our society, and that includes our Jewish establishments, has become so liberal that one Biblical prohibition after another is abandoned. What types of behavior patterns are those fools setting for their children. Be forewarned: such fools [i.e. members of BCC] are not the kind of company to keep.”⁴³⁸

Rabbi Herman saw himself forced to inform his lay and rabbinical colleagues about this issue. He sent a letter to all congregational presidents and rabbis in the UAHC with a copy of the editorial. He enclosed his response to Joseph J. Cummins, editor of the *B'nai Brith Messenger*, in which Herman protested against the author's offensive tone and the ignorance towards the UAHC.⁴³⁹ The response by the UAHC affiliated members was impressive. Over 125 supportive letters from all around the country arrived, rejecting the assumptions and implications in the editorial.⁴⁴⁰ This led BCC's president, Arnold Pincus, to summarize:

“I believe that the message is clear – the time has passed when homophobia, within as well as without the Jewish community, can safely bait gays. [...], our brothers and sisters in the UAHC have once again demonstrated Reform Judaism's concern for social justice.”⁴⁴¹

The *B'nai Brith Messenger* never officially apologized and an answer to Rabbi Herman from editor Cummins is not recorded in the archives. However, the incident shows a remarkable shift within the Union. About two years prior, BCC had clearly been admitted to the Union, but with unmistakable opposition by rabbis and several lay leaders. Now, a wave of empathy and sympathy reached the congregation. Fellow Jews around the country

⁴³⁸ Anonymous (1976): “Company Not to Keep,” in: *B'nai Brith Messenger*. 80th year, No. 47, November 19, p. 24.

⁴³⁹ Cf. BCCR, Box 25, Folder 9, letter from Erwin Herman to Joseph J. Cummins, November 23, 1976.

⁴⁴⁰ Cf. Pincus, Arnold (1977): “A Presidential Message,” in: *Beth Chayim Chadashim Newsletter*. Vol. 4, No. 7, p. 2.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

defended BCC against arguments which had been naturally appropriated by its opponents only a few years before.

BCC's influence on the UAHC became even more obvious during the Union's Biennial in 1977 when BCC successfully lobbied for the adaptation of the resolution "Human Rights of Homosexuals." Aaron Cooper describes it as "one of the greatest challenges in its [i. e. BCC's] then short history."⁴⁴² The resolution, among others written by Rabbi Herman, was supposed to clarify Reform Judaism's position in the difficult political climate surrounding gay rights legislation. Singer Anita Bryant's anti-gay political campaigns or the Briggs Initiative in California, which attempted to suspend gay and lesbian teachers from public schools, were considered especially threatening. The first attempt to pass the resolution failed with only 20% support. The resolution was then returned to the committee for rewriting.⁴⁴³ The delegates had voiced various concerns. BCC's representatives at the Biennial knew that they had to induce the delegates to vote in their favor in a second vote. Thus, they made a statement about the congregation and the resolution's meaning for the gay (Jewish) community.⁴⁴⁴ They also lobbied during breaks – "in effect, a crash course to demystify homosexuality. As a result of a heroic 24-hour effort by BCC delegates,"⁴⁴⁵ the resolution was eventually passed with 80% of the votes. BCC was the decisive element for the first pro-gay rights resolution ever passed by Reform Judaism or any other major Jewish organization.⁴⁴⁶ Shortly after, the resolution was slightly adapted and adopted by the CCAR.

⁴⁴² Cooper, 1989, p. 87.

⁴⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴⁴⁴ Cf. Vogel, Gary (1978): "UAHC Convention Report," in: *Beth Chayim Chadashim Newsletter*. Vol. 5, No. 7, pp. 3–6.

⁴⁴⁵ Cooper, 1989, p. 87.

⁴⁴⁶ The text of the resolution states: "WHEREAS the UAHC has consistently supported civil rights and civil liberties for all persons, and WHEREAS the Constitution guarantees civil rights to all individuals, BE IT, THEREFORE, RESOLVED THAT homosexual persons are entitled to equal protection under the law. We oppose discriminating against homosexuals in areas of opportunity, including employment and housing. We call upon our society to see that such protection is provided in actuality. BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT we affirm our belief that private sexual acts between consenting adults are not the proper province of government and law enforcement agencies. BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT we urge congregations to conduct

BCC's speedy development also included the purchase of its own building that the congregation had wished for so long. In 1977, the congregation successfully collected enough money for the down payment on a building in the Pico Robertson neighborhood. The members themselves renovated the building on their own and an anonymous donor enabled the congregation to symbolically burn its mortgage papers in 1983.⁴⁴⁷

Directly after the admission to the UAHC, Rabbi Herman organized rabbinical interns from HUC-JIR Los Angeles to serve at BCC for one year. At first, HUC-JIR refused to give the work of a student serving in a homosexual congregation any credit. However, the first intern, Scott Sperling, intervened and put a lot of effort into persuading the directory of HUC-JIR. Eventually, the directory dropped its reservations and several students served in the congregation until it was able to hire its first full-time rabbi in 1983.⁴⁴⁸ Janet Marder, a heterosexual rabbi, was hired for the congregation. The appointment of Janet Marder demonstrated that the gay outreach synagogue “was more than a temporary phenomenon on the landscape of Jewish life.”⁴⁴⁹ Marder's time was not always easy because she had to challenge her own prejudices and, as a heterosexual rabbi, BCC's members were not always as welcoming towards her as expected. Still, after leaving BCC she concluded:

“Above and beyond my moments of frustration, I feel profoundly blessed to have devoted five years of my life to working with Beth Chayim Chadashim. Apart from the intrinsic joy of working with an active, questing, and spirited community, I feel grateful for the education I've been given – a chance to see

appropriate educational programming for youth and adults so as to provide a greater understanding of the relation of Jewish values to the range of human sexuality.” (Resolution Adopted by the 45th General Assembly of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations Biennial, 1977: Human Rights of Homosexuals, in: *Kulanu: All of Us. A Program and Resource Guide for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Inclusion. Revised and Expanded Edition* (2007), ed. by Richard F. Address, Joel L. Kushner, and Geoffrey Mitelman. New York, p. 249.)

⁴⁴⁷ Cf. Nathenson, n. y.

⁴⁴⁸ Cf. Hertz, 2008, pp. 79–83.

⁴⁴⁹ Cooper, 1989, p. 93.

with my own eyes and make up my own mind rather than swallowing the judgment and slogans of others.”⁴⁵⁰

During Marder’s rabbinate, the congregation had to face the AIDS crisis, a troubling time that constituted an acid test for the whole gay community. BCC developed specific Jewish answers and engaged in helping HIV/AIDS patients and their families with their own organization *Nechama – A Jewish Response to A.I.D.S.* BCC and its sister synagogues urged Reform Judaism to help victims of the disease and to not adopt defamatory views on HIV/AIDS patients.⁴⁵¹ This is just one example that shows that BCC not only had to work against Jewish perceptions of homosexuality but was always challenged with the problems the whole gay community had to face. BCC never saw itself as a separate but as an integral part of the gay community. However, BCC’s answers were distinctly Jewish since its members wanted to feel closer to Judaism, the religion from which they had been rejected in other synagogues or Jewish groups.

⁴⁵⁰ Marder, Janet (1989): “Getting to Know the Gay and Lesbian Shul: A Rabbi Moves from Tolerance to Acceptance,” in: *Twice Blessed. On Being Lesbian, Gay, and Jewish*, ed. by Christie Balka and Andy Rose. Boston, pp. 209–217, p. 217.

⁴⁵¹ Cf. Nathenson, n. y.

6 Conclusion

BCC is another “L. A. intervention” and, as this paper has tried to show, its success is not conceivable without the specific social conditions found in L. A. Los Angeles was the birthplace of the homophile movement and the movement for the rights of gays, respectively. The tolerant atmosphere in the city also influenced the Jews in Los Angeles. Jews created their own identity in the cracks between different cultures. They developed a more open and tolerant attitude than their counterparts on the East Coast. The West Coast became a hub for Jewish-religious innovation. Hence, the BCC’s founders encountered a sympathetic environment when they expressed their needs; they could be certain of broad support.

However, BCC’s success was also influenced by general changes in American Judaism. Political topics in America influenced the synagogue’s daily life, feminism most notably among them. Following Denise Eger, the improvement of the homosexuals’ situation cannot be seen without the input of the feminist movement as the involvement of feminists made the synagogue more innovative.⁴⁵² During the 1960s and 1970s, the religious climate in the United States changed to the benefit of formerly marginalized groups.

Another example for this is the MCC. Troy Perry’s concept for a church for homosexuals, a place where people could worship, despite and in accordance with their sexual orientation or identity, spread quickly around the country. Since it became to be the first widely known institution of its kind, it also attracted Jews. In traditional synagogues, they would not be able to bring their partner, they were not granted special ceremonies, and they felt discomfort at being denied their Jewish heritage.⁴⁵³ When Jews realized that they could not become full members of MCC, four of them decided to found their own temple. In Los Angeles, this foundation indeed occurred for the first time, but the *Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan*

⁴⁵² Cf. Eger, 2001, pp. 180–181.

⁴⁵³ Cf. Maggid, 1989, pp. 158–159.

Community Churches proved to be the birthplace of many other gay outreach synagogues in the following years (for instance Bet Mishpachah in Washington, D.C.).

From this first vague idea, a new temple originated. This new synagogue immediately reached out to the local Jewish community. Their founders were certain that the congregation could only grow and have an impact on other Jews when they received initial funding and other resources from larger denominations. Reform Judaism was considered the only possible option. Even though the founders were not affiliated with any Jewish denomination, they were willing to guide their congregation towards Reform Judaism and were ready to cooperate with the UAHC. This is what distinguishes this attempt from a similar endeavor by another group of Jewish homosexuals in New York (the “Temple of David and Jonathan”). When the group asked for the Union’s help to form a temple, they refused to affiliate with the Union under any circumstances.⁴⁵⁴ As Irvin Husin from the New York Federation recalls:

“We ran into a serious problem that they really did not understand what the meaning of Judaism was. [...] But, we informed them [...] that we could not see how we could sponsor a request at that stage for admission to the Union; that they’ve got to think about several things.”⁴⁵⁵

The attempt in New York failed. But the group from Los Angeles persuaded the Union with their dedication and passion.

Their leaders succeeded in uniting a congregation whose members came from different religious backgrounds. The temple developed its own, creative liturgy, eventually leading to its own prayer book, in which the sexist language of other prayer books was revised. This is merely one example of BCC facing gender issues.

BCC could rely on supporters from established Jewish institutions in Los Angeles. Their support was crucial for BCC’s success. Various rabbis, cantors, and lay leaders were invited as guests during the services or

⁴⁵⁴ Cf. Hertz, 2008, p. 44.

⁴⁵⁵ AJA, Erwin Herman Papers, Box 1, Folder 28. MS-822, UAHC Board of Trustees, Executive Committee Proceedings, June 8–9, 1974, p. 31.

performed at holidays. Other congregations like Temple Akiva in Culver City offered BCC space and other facilities for the High Holiday services. Most notably, Rabbi Erwin Herman became the temple's champion. He became a passionate advocate for the young synagogue, guided it through the affiliation process with the UAHC, and contributed to its continued existence until his death in 2008.

Herman contributed with other colleagues from L. A. to a discussion on the issue of homosexual Jews of previously unprecedented scale. Within their arguments, they moved the needs of those affected to the center of attention within their arguments. They stressed the devotion and motivation of BCC's members in moving closer to Judaism. For the first time in modern Judaism, heterosexuals publicly underlined their support for homosexual Jews.

However, renowned rabbis resisted the attempts to support congregations of homosexuals, let alone have them join Reform Judaism. They argued following *halakha* regulations and Jewish tradition.

Nevertheless, supporters, and Erwin Herman in particular, were able to persuade the Union and the different stages of the affiliation process to vote for the admission of BCC, and they especially profited from Reform Judaism's lay leadership. The lay leadership was ready to accept the reality of life for homosexuals and their individual needs in a way that left biblical tradition behind.

BCC's admission into the UAHC in June 1974, as the first institution ever accepted by a mainstream religious organization, was a milestone on the road to Jewish homosexual integration. It is obvious that the process initiated in Los Angeles was a revolutionary one. It is conceivable that the first gay outreach synagogue could have been developed somewhere else, but it was in this city that the synagogue found its straight allies - a city that was known to be the early center of the gay rights movement. The Jewish community there was more open and tolerant than in other parts of the country. BCC benefitted from these circumstances. In Los Angeles, there already existed a strong gay community network and religious landscape. The impetus for major changes in Reform Judaism started on the West Coast, which would eventually spread to other denominations. Without

BCC's revolutionary work, the success of other gay outreach congregations could not be guaranteed. Its rapid recognition by a mainstream religious institution served as a role model for others. But BCC did not stop there and successfully promoted the further acceptance of homosexual, later of bi- and transsexual, Jews. The resolution "Human Rights of Homosexuals," was the first major call for decriminalization and acceptance of homosexuals in Judaism and can be credited to BCC and its allies in Los Angeles. Without their devotion and engagement, further steps like the admission of gay and lesbian rabbis or a Jewish same-sex marriage in Reform Judaism as well as in Conservative Judaism would have been much harder to achieve. These circumstances do not find enough recognition in academic literature. Topics on LGBTQ in Judaism are underrepresented and offer many opportunities for further research. In discovering the history of Jewish queer groups, we can understand the formation of queer Jewish identities better in a way that can subsequently inspire disaffected people.

Today, the standing of queer Jews in Jewish religious communities is much better than 50 years ago. However, there remain many challenges which require the ongoing existence of queer synagogues: For instance, an overwhelming majority of Jewish Orthodoxy doesn't accept homosexuality, homosexual partnerships, or any other deviation of the heterosexual norm. Conversion therapies continue to be offered by a number of, mostly Orthodox, rabbis and the acceptance of transgendered Jews is still lacking, even in Reform congregations. In liturgy, topics on queer Jews and their specific needs are poorly served. However, thanks to the pioneering work of BCC and many other devoted activists, queer and straight alike, thousands of Jews today can loudly and clearly proclaim, without fearing immediate rejection by their religious community: "We are Jewish, gay and proud!"

7 Deutsche Zusammenfassung

„Gay, Jewish and Proud“ –

Die Gründung von Beth Chayim Chadashim als Meilenstein in der Integration von jüdischen Homosexuellen

Im Jahr 1972 gründete sich *Beth Chayim Chadashim* als erste Synagoge für schwule und lesbische Juden*⁴⁵⁶. Zu diesem Zeitpunkt waren homosexuelle Handlungen zwischen Homosexuellen in den meisten U.S.-Bundesstaaten, darunter auch Kalifornien, verboten; keine der jüdischen Denominationen akzeptierten offen schwul oder lesbisch lebende Anhänger*innen, da Homosexualität in der jüdischen Tradition als „Gräueltat“ angesehen wird (*Levitikus 18,22*). Homosexuelle Juden* fühlten sich ausgegrenzt und versteckten ihre Sexualität nicht selten aus Angst vor Ausgrenzung, andere entfernten sich gänzlich von ihren religiösen Traditionen. Dennoch kamen im April 1972 vier Juden* in der *Metropolitan Community Church* in Los Angeles zusammen und hatten eine revolutionäre Idee: Sie wollten eigene eigene Synagoge für die Bedürfnisse von Schwulen und Lesben gründen. Wenige Monate später führten sie ihren ersten Freitagabendgottesdienst durch und hielten die ersten Feierlichkeiten zu Rosh HaShanah und Yom Kippur ab. Sie zögerten nicht lange, um Kontakt mit dem lokalen Ableger der *Union of American Hebrew Congregations*, dem Dachverband des U.S.-amerikanischen Reformjudentums, aufzunehmen. Die Vereinigung half der noch jungen Synagoge, sich weiterzuentwickeln und nur zwei Jahre später wurde BCC offiziell ins Reformjudentum aufgenommen.

⁴⁵⁶ Das Gendern des Wortes „Jude“ stellt Autor*innen regelmäßig vor Probleme. Das Einsetzen des Gendergaps („Jüd*innen“) führt dazu, dass der männliche Teil (der Jüd bzw. die Jüden) eine veraltete Form des Wortes ergibt und, wenn sie überhaupt noch verwendet wird, in einem negativen Kontext auftaucht. Deshalb haben sich die Autor*innen der 2017 erstmals erschienen *Jalta* entschieden, Juden* zu verwenden, um alle Gender mit dem Sternchen einzuschließen (vgl. Peaceman, Hannah; Wohl von Haselberg, Lea (2017): „Eine Eröffnung“, in: *Jalta. Positionen zur jüdischen Gegenwart*, hrsg. v. Micha Brumlik, Marina Chernivsky, Max Czollek et al., No. 1, S. 4–7, S. 6). Diesen neuen Impuls möchte ich im Folgenden aufnehmen.

Diese Arbeit untersucht, wie es möglich war, dass sich in den frühen 1970er-Jahren eine solch bisher einmalige Synagoge gründen konnte und in wenigen Jahren vom Reformjudentum offiziell anerkannt wurde. Dafür untersucht die Arbeit zunächst, welche spezifischen Voraussetzungen für die Gründung von BCC vorhanden waren (*Kapitel 2*). Zunächst war Los Angeles ein idealer Ort, um Vorbilder und eine unterstützende Infrastruktur zu finden. Die moderne Bewegung für die Rechte von Homosexuellen hatte ihren Ausgangspunkt in der Stadt an der Ostküste. Nach Jim Kepner hat die Stadt eine reiche „gay prehistory“⁴⁵⁷. Queere Kultur gehört zur DNA der Stadt.⁴⁵⁸ Die ersten Organisationen, die sich für eine Verbesserung der Rechte für Homosexuellen einsetzten, *The Mattachine* und *ONE Inc.*, wurden in den 1950er-Jahren hier gegründet. Auseinandersetzungen zwischen der queeren Community und der Polizei in Los Angeles waren zwar nicht selten, dennoch profitierten Schwule und Lesben von der allgemeinen Toleranz für unterschiedliche Lebensentwürfe, die offene Filmindustrie sowie von der hedonistischen Atmosphäre der Stadt. Die besonderen Voraussetzungen in Los Angeles wirkten sich auch auf die jüdische Gemeinde im Allgemeinen aus. Die jüdische Gemeinschaft konnte in der Stadt andere Erfahrungen machen als ihr Gegenpart an der Ostküste. Sie war von jeher mit der kulturellen Diversität L.A.s konfrontiert. Die Arbeiter*innenschaft lebte in ihren Vierteln mit anderen Einwandergruppen zusammen. In Hollywood konnten Juden* den „American Dream“ erfinden und sich als jüdisch zu identifizieren wurde zu einer freien Entscheidung. Politisch bildete die jüdische Gemeinschaft multiethnische Allianzen und engagierte sich überproportional stark an der aufkommenden Bürgerrechtsbewegung sowie an der Anti-Kriegs- und Umweltbewegung. Juden* an der Westküste waren, allgemein gesprochen, liberaler und offener; die Westküste wurde zum Inkubator religiöser Innovationen.⁴⁵⁹

Neben den spezifischen Voraussetzungen in der Stadt Los Angeles veränderte sich die amerikanische Synagoge nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg

⁴⁵⁷ White, C. Todd, 2009, p. 6.

⁴⁵⁸ Vgl. *Roots of Equality*, 2011, p. 11.

⁴⁵⁹ Vgl. Kaplan, 2009, p. 51.

stark. Sie war nicht mehr der einzige Ort, an dem gebeten werden konnte. In so genannten *Havurot* kamen insbesondere jüngere Juden* zusammen, um ohne Einfluss der Denominationen Gottesdienste feiern zu können. Innerhalb der Synagogen verlangten die Laien stärkeren Einfluss und von ihnen geleitete Gottesdienste wurden häufiger. Auch die Themen, die in Synagogen adressiert wurden, richteten sich mehr nach den Belangen ihrer Anhänger*innen. Ein großer Einfluss auf das synagogale Leben war die feministische Bewegung. Frauen forderten, zumindest in nicht-orthodoxen Synagogen, Gleichberechtigung. So ordinierte das Reformjudentum im Jahr 1972 mit Sally Priesand die erste Rabbinerin und Frauen erhielten langsam gleichen Zugang zu Ämtern in der Gemeinde. Ähnliche Veränderungen fanden auch in amerikanischen christlichen Organisationen statt. Nicht selten bildeten sich innerhalb dieser Prozesse subalterne Gemeinschaften. So beispielsweise die *Metropolitan Community Church*, die 1968 vom Baptistenprediger Troy Perry in Los Angeles gegründet wurde. Sie war die erste größere und weit vernetzte Institution, die für die Belange von Schwulen und Lesben eintrat. Troy Perry, selbst homosexuell und deshalb von seiner Heimatgemeinde verstoßen, erschuf mit der „Mutterkirche“ in Los Angeles ein Vorbild, dem schnell andere in den Vereinigten Staaten und darüber hinaus folgten. Die Kirchen, die sich in der *Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches* zusammenschlossen, waren häufig die einzigen Orte, an dem ein Leben mit einer religiösen und homosexuellen Identität möglich war. Deshalb kamen auch Juden* zu den Gottesdiensten, auch wenn sie keine Mitglieder der Kirche werden konnten. Genauso taten es vier Juden* am bereits erwähnten Abend des 4. Aprils 1972 in der MCC L. A. Sie waren die einzigen, die zu der wöchentlichen politischen Diskussionsrunde erschienen waren.

Kapitel 3 widmet sich der Gründungsgeschichte der Synagoge und ihren ersten organisatorischen Schritten. Während des Treffens am 4. April kam die Idee auf, eine Synagoge für schwule und lesbische Juden* zu schaffen, die in Anlehnung an ihren Gründungsort zunächst *Metropolitan Community Temple* heißen sollte. Diese Synagoge sollte sich auf die Bedürfnisse von Schwulen und Lesben fokussieren, einen „safe space“ bieten und eine Tradition wiederentdecken, die homosexuelle Juden* ausgrenzte. Die

Gründer*innen erhielten erste Unterstützung von Troy Perry und konnten die Räumlichkeiten der Kirche für ihr Unternehmen nutzen. So fand bereits im Juni der erste Freitagabendgottesdienst statt.

Bereits kurz nach dem ersten organisatorischen Treffen nahm einer der Gründer*innen, Jerry Small, Kontakt mit einem anonym gebliebenen Rabbiner auf, den er für die Idee gewinnen wollte. Er war zunächst schockiert, willigte schließlich einem Treffen ein und erörterte mit Small, dass nur im Reformjudentum eine Anerkennung der Gemeinde möglich wäre. Mit der erneuten Hilfe von Troy Perry trafen sich Small schließlich mit dem Pacific Southwest Council der UAHC und erhielt überraschenderweise sofortige praktische Unterstützung. Die Wahl des Reformjudentums als Ort einer organisatorischen Affiliation erscheint aus dieser Sicht opportunistisch. Ein Erfolg der Gemeinde wurde nur mit der Infrastruktur und finanziellen Förderung einer religiösen Dachorganisation als realistisch eingeschätzt. Die Gründer*innen selbst rechneten sich vor der Gründung keiner Denomination zu und wählten die beste Alternative für ihr Unternehmen. Nichtsdestotrotz stellte sich insbesondere der Direktor des Pacific Southwest Councils, Rabbiner Erwin Herman, als großer Unterstützer der Gemeinde heraus. Bewegt von dem Coming-Out seines Sohnes, wurde er selbst BCC-Mitglied, blieb dies bis zu seinem Tode und steuerte die Synagoge in Richtung einer Aufnahme in die UAHC. Er und seine Frau setzen sich ab ihrer ersten Begegnung mit BCC umfassend für die Belange von queeren Juden* im Judentum ein.

Bis zur Aufnahme durch das Reformjudentum musste die Synagoge jedoch einige Hürden überwinden. Sie gab sich eine eigene Satzung und mussten in diesem Zuge klären, ob die Synagoge auch für Nicht-Juden* und Heterosexuelle offen stehen sollte. Diese Frage schien die noch junge Gemeinde bereits früh zu spalten, jedoch schaffte die Interimspräsidentin Sherry Sokoloff, die Krise abzuwenden. Im Januar 1973 wurde ein neuer Vorstand gewählt und der Gemeinde ein hebräischer Name gegeben, um sich von MCC abgrenzen zu können. Anlehnend an den MCC Newsletter „New Life“ wurde der Name *Beth Chayim Chadashim*, „Haus des neuen Lebens“, einstimmig gewählt.

Am selben Abend nach den beiden richtungsweisenden Entscheidungen, brachte ein Feuer im Gebäude von MCC die Gemeinde in existenzielle Schwierigkeiten. Nun fehlte ein sicherer Treffpunkt. Die Rabbiner Leonard I. Beerman und Stanford Ragins vom *Leo Baeck Temple* in Los Angeles nahm die Gemeinde im Sinne der Gastfreundschaft bei sich auf, bis sie im Mai 1974 wieder in die neuen Räumlichkeiten der MCC ziehen konnte. Zuvor jedoch konnte BCC eine eigene Torah-Rolle mit beeindruckender Geschichte durch eine*n anonyme*n Spender*in erwerben. Die Torah stammte aus der jüdischen Gemeinde in Chotěboř (Tschechien), die von den Nationalsozialisten zerstört wurde. Die Rolle überstand den Krieg in Prag und wurde mit vielen anderen, von den Nationalsozialisten konfiszierten Judaica von einem Fonds im Vereinigten Königreich aufgekauft und restauriert, um sie an neu gegründete Synagogen weiterzugeben.

Im weiteren Verlauf der Konsolidierung wurde der Gemeinde deutlich, dass es schwierig war, Juden* mit unterschiedlichen religiösen Hintergründen zusammenzubringen. Anzugspunkt war für BCC nicht die Denomination, sondern ihr besonderes Profil. Einige Mitglieder fühlten sich einer konkreten Denomination zugehörig, andere hatten keine religiöse Erziehung erfahren, wiederum andere distanzierten sich von der Religion aufgrund ihrer ausgrenzenden Haltung gegenüber Homosexuellen. Durch spezielle Angebote für unterschiedliche Interessensgruppen sowie Bildungsprogramme zu jüdischen Themen wurde versucht, diese Differenzen aufzufangen. Des Weiteren wurde versucht, die Öffentlichkeitsarbeit zu organisieren. So erhielt die Synagoge Korrespondenz von interessierten Juden* auf der gesamten Welt. Ein Komitee koordinierte die Entwicklung eines Newsletter, der die Bemühungen der Gemeinde bündeln sollte, möglichst viele Interessent*innen zu erreichen. Außerdem wurde versucht, sich mit der queeren Community in Los Angeles und der Region zu vernetzen.

Ein weiterer Aspekt der Gemeindearbeit war der Umgang mit Gender. Das *Unterkapitel 3.6* adressiert die Problematik, dass die Geschichte von lesbischen Frauen häufig nicht erfasst wird, wenn über „gay outreach synagogues“ gesprochen wird. Mit Melissa Wilcox' Studie zu den speziellen Bedürfnissen von Frauen in schwul-lesbischen Synagogen wird diese Leerstelle erörtert. Auch BCC hatte Konflikte zwischen Frauen und Männern,

weshalb ein Komitee zur Steigerung der Partizipation von Frauen gegründet wurde. Dabei müssen jedoch die betroffenen Frauen und ihre Bedürfnisse gehört werden.

Kapitel 4 widmet sich schließlich der Aufnahme von BCC ins Reformjudentum. Mit dem Feuer in MCC im Januar 1973 wurde BCC in jeder Berichterstattung mit seinen bereits vorhandenen Kontakten in die UAHC erwähnt. Dies löste zum Teil harsche Kritik unter Reformrabbinnern aus, was dazu führte, dass Rabbiner Alexander Schindler, baldiger Präsident der UAHC, die neu gegründete Synagoge öffentlich adressieren musste. Er formulierte vier wesentliche Fragen, die mit dem Aufkommen von BCC beantwortet werden mussten: 1.) Sollte die UAHC die Gründung von Synagogen wie BCC unterstützen?; 2.) Muss ein Rabbiner solchen Gemeinden dienen?; 3.) Sollten solche Gemeinden in die UAHC aufgenommen werden?; 4.) Gäbe es die Möglichkeit, gleichgeschlechtliche Eheschließungen durchzuführen? Als Reaktion darauf wurden elf Responses von bekannten Reformrabbinnern, der *Central Conference of American Rabbis* und zwei Psychologen verfasst, die das Kapitel in ihren Argumenten analysiert. Diese Dokumente stellen die erste weitreichende Diskussion über Homosexualität im Judentum des 20. Jahrhunderts dar.

Die Seite, die sich gegen eine Aufnahme von Synagogen wie BCC aussprach, bestand aus dem bekannten *poseq* Solomon B. Freehof, den Professoren am *Hebrew Union College – Institute of Religion* Eugene Mihaly und Eugene B. Borowitz sowie dem Psychologen Alan A. Lipton. Rabbiner Joseph R. Narrot aus Miami lehnte eine Aufnahme zunächst ab, widerrief seine Einschätzung aber nach Gesprächen innerhalb seiner Gemeinde. Die Argumente gegen die Aufnahme homosexueller Gemeinden waren vielfältig. Alle Gegner sahen in der Homosexualität per se einen Verstoß gegen die jüdische Tradition. Sie unterschieden sich aber darin, wie Homosexuelle zu betrachten waren: entweder als Sünder, die entweder als notwendiger Teil einer Gemeinde angesehen wurden oder die über ihre Bedürfnisse schweigen müssten, oder als *anus*, die aufgrund bestimmter Umstände gezwungen waren, sich so zu verhalten wie sie es taten. Eine damit verbundene Frage war, wie Homosexuelle psychologisch angesehen werden müssten. Unabhängig davon, ob sie nun als krank eingestuft

wurden oder ob ihnen unterstellt wurde, über ihre Sexualität selbst zu entscheiden, würden Homosexuelle aus Sicht der Gegner das jüdische Recht aktiv verletzen. Eine Zulassung von BCC oder einer ähnlichen Synagoge würde also offiziell etwas unterstützen, was nach jüdischer Tradition nicht gerechtfertigt werden könne. Ergänzende Argumente stellten fest, dass homosexuelle Gemeinden der familienzentrierten Struktur einer Synagoge widersprechen und nicht zur Kontinuität des Judentums beitragen würden. Die Gegner forderten daher eine Integration von Homosexuellen in traditionelle Synagogen. Einige von ihnen räumten ein, dass die gegenwärtige soziale Stellung von Homosexuellen eine besondere Behandlung in Synagogen erfordere oder dass darin Gemeinden geschult werden müssten, Homosexuelle richtig zu integrieren. Andere sahen keinen Handlungsbedarf und gaben den Homosexuellen sogar die Schuld, sich verschließen zu wollen.

Es gab jedoch auch andere, die diese Argumente zurückwiesen und Responses verfassten, die die ersten weit verbreiteten Dokumente innerhalb des Judentums des 20. Jahrhunderts darstellen, die homosexuelle Juden* in ihren Bedürfnissen unterstützen. Darunter waren die Rabbiner Erwin Herman, Leonard I. Beerman und Stanford Ragins, die BCC bereits auf lokaler Ebene unterstützen und von Los Angeles heraus einen entscheidenden Impuls zur Veränderung der Stellung von Homosexuellen auslösten. Ihnen schlossen sich Rabbiner Roland B. Gittelsohn, ehemaliger Präsident der CCAR, sowie der Psychologe Judd Marmor vom University College Los Angeles an. Ihre Argumente für die Aufnahme von BCC rücken die Homosexuellen selbst in den Mittelpunkt der Argumentation. Die Befürworter berücksichtigten die aktuelle rechtliche und soziale Position der Homosexuellen. Neue wissenschaftliche Erkenntnisse lieferten genügend Beweise, um anzunehmen, dass Homosexualität ein natürlicher menschlicher Zustand und keine freie Entscheidung sei. Rabbiner, die mit BCC zusammenarbeiteten, betonten, dass die junge Gemeinde den gleichen „Schmerz eines Neugeborenen“⁴⁶⁰ habe wie jede andere Synagoge. Dennoch waren die Mitglieder von BCC besonders engagiert und

⁴⁶⁰ Herman, 1973, p. 36.

motiviert. Sie waren getrieben von dem Wunsch, der jüdischen Tradition näher zu kommen und noch jüdischer zu werden. Eben dieses jüdische Erbe sei historisch von Ausgrenzung und Verfolgung geprägt und erfordere Akzeptanz und Engagement für unterdrückte Gruppen. Jedoch war die Idee der Befürworter, dass Gemeinden von und für Homosexuelle nur eine vorübergehende Lösung darstellen sollen, bis Homosexuelle in jüdischen Gemeinden vollumfassend akzeptiert werden würden. Es wurde angenommen, dass homosexuelle Juden* ihren Status in der allgemeinen jüdischen Gemeinde mit diesen speziellen Synagogen verbessern könnten. Aufgrund ihrer persönlichen Erfahrung wussten die Autoren der Respon- sen, dass nur eine direkte Begegnung mit Homosexuellen und die Auseinandersetzung mit ihrer Situation die ablehnende Haltung der jüdischen Gemeinde ändern könnte.

Diese Einschätzung schien sich als korrekt herauszustellen, als BCC seinen Antrag auf Mitgliedschaft in die UAHC Mitte Juni 1973 offiziell stellte. BCCs Mitglieder wollten eine Entscheidung nicht dem Zufall überlassen und sie warben zu unterschiedlichen Gelegenheiten für ihr Anliegen. Überraschenderweise nahm BCC die ersten Hürden auf den Weg zur Aufnahme ins Reformjudentum ohne größere Widerstände. In der entscheidenden Sitzung des „Executive Committee of the UAHC Board of Trustees“ wurde BCCs Antrag leidenschaftlich diskutiert. Die Befürworter und Gegner tauschten nochmals ihre Argumente aus. Schließlich entschieden sich die Laien der UAHC mit einer überwältigenden Mehrheit für eine Aufnahme. Sie waren weiter als die Mehrheit der Rabbiner des Reformjudentums, die sich während der Sitzung vehement gegen eine Aufnahme aussprachen. Mit dieser Entscheidung wurde BCC jedoch zur ersten schwul-lesbischen Institution, die von einer religiösen Dachorganisation offiziell anerkannt wurde. Doch BCC stoppte sein Engagement nicht an dieser Stelle. Seine Mitglieder setzen sich weiter für die Verbesserung der Situation von Homosexuellen im (Reform-)Judentum, aber auch in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft ein.

Das vorletzte *Kapitel 5* liefert einen Einblick in das weiterführende Engagement von BCC nach der Aufnahme ins Reformjudentum. BCC vernetzte sich im Folgenden mit weiteren Synagogen für Schwule und

Lesben in den Vereinigten Staaten. Gemeinsam organisierten sie die ersten *International Conferences of Gay and Lesbian Jews*, die 1980 in die Gründung des *World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations* (heute: *World Congress of GLBT Jews*) mündeten. Gleichzeitig engagierte sich BCC in der regionalen queeren Community und nahm öffentlichkeitswirksam an Podiumsdiskussionen und Veranstaltungen teil. Schrittweise wurden Repräsentant*innen des Reformjudentums offener im Umgang mit BCC und die Gemeinde schaffte es im Jahr 1977, dass die UAHC (und kurze Zeit später auch die CCAR) eine Resolution verabschiedete, die zum ersten Mal in der Geschichte des Reformjudentums eine komplette rechtliche Gleichstellung für Homosexuelle in den USA forderte.

Die Leitung der Synagoge war engagiert und motiviert, eine lebendige und beständige Gemeinde zu bilden. Für die meisten Mitglieder war es das erste Mal, dass sie ihre doppelte Identität als Juden* und Homosexuelle zusammenführen konnten. Sie erkannten, dass die Verbindung dieser beiden Identitäten kein unmögliches Unterfangen war. Der spätere Vizepräsident des Tempels, Rick Block, drückte dieses Gefühl folgendermaßen aus: „Now I think of myself as Jewish, gay and proud.“⁴⁶¹ Diese drei Wörter – Jewish, gay and proud – wurden zum Slogan der Synagoge.

Heutzutage ist das Ansehen von queeren Juden* viel besser als noch vor 50 Jahren. Es gibt jedoch noch viele Herausforderungen: Beispielsweise akzeptiert eine überwiegende Mehrheit der jüdischen Orthodoxie keine Homosexualität, homosexuelle Partnerschaften oder andere Abweichungen von der heterosexuellen Norm. Konversionstherapien werden weiterhin von einer Reihe überwiegend orthodoxer Rabbiner angeboten, und die Akzeptanz gegenüber trans* Juden* ist selbst nicht in allen Reformgemeinden gegeben. Dank der Pionierarbeit von BCC und vielen anderen engagierten Aktivist*innen, sowohl queer als auch heterosexuell, können jedoch heute Tausende von Juden* laut und deutlich behaupten, ohne eine sofortige Ablehnung zu befürchten: „We are Jewish, gay and proud.“

⁴⁶¹ Sarff, 1975, p. 11.

8 Acknowledgements

It is not common in our field to publish a master's thesis. That is why I want to thank any critical, challenging, but also laudatory comment throughout the writing and publication process. They helped me to structure and scrutinize my thesis at every step.

I want to thank the synagogue *Beth Chayim Chadashim*. You've welcomed me like I was a long-time friend and supported me with every inquiry and question. I'll always hold your hospitality in grateful memory. A special thanks to Lisa Edwards, BCC's Rabbi Emerita. You've been more than supportive, gave me incredible valuable insights, and introduced me to the religious LGBTQI* world in Los Angeles. This thesis wouldn't be conceivable without all of you on the other side of the planet.

My two supervisors of the thesis, Prof. Dr. Sina Rauschenbach and Markus Krah, PhD, were incredibly helpful during the way. Your critical, but always constructive view facilitated the writing process and gave my research the necessary structure. Your generous feedback enabled this publication after all. Thank you and I'm looking forward to our further collaboration.

Another thanks to Michael K. Schulz and Rebekka Denz, the editors of the *Pri ha-Pardes* series. Your comments on the manuscript were very helpful and made my thesis ready for publication. Thanks to Julian Hofmann who did a great job with the final proofreading and editing.

And what would I be without my dearest friends? First and foremost, I want to thank you, Nina Dengg. Your feedback and verbal revisions opened the door to hand in this thesis. I'll greatly benefit from your remarks in the future. And a special thanks to you, Johanna and Marie, for your open ears, comments or critical questions over the kitchen table, and your unconditional support.

9 List of Abbreviations

AJA	American Jewish Archives
APA	American Psychological Association
BCC	Beth Chayim Chadashim
BCCR	ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Beth Chayim Chadashim Records
CBST	Congregation Beit Simchat Torah
CCAR	Central Conference of American Rabbis
HUC-JIR	Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion
L.A.	Los Angeles
LBT	Leo Baeck Temple
LGBT(Q)	Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender(/Queer)
MCC	Metropolitan Community Church
MCT	Metropolitan Community Temple
NFTS	National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods
UAHC	Union of American Hebrew Congregations

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11 About the Author

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Pri ha-Pardes Volume 13

Pri ha-Pardes (Fruit of the Orchard) is a publication series of the Association for Jewish Studies in Germany (Vereinigung für Jüdische Studien e. V.), which is published in cooperation with the Department of Jewish Studies and Religious Studies at the University of Potsdam.

This publication examines the foundation and institutional integration of the first gay-lesbian synagogue Beth Chayim Chadashim, which was founded in Los Angeles in 1972. As early as June 1974, the synagogue was admitted to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the umbrella organization of the Reform congregations in the United States. Previously, the potential acceptance of a congregation by and for homosexual Jews triggered an intense and broad debate within Reform Judaism. The work asks how it was possible to successfully establish a gay-lesbian synagogue at a time when homosexual acts were considered unnatural and contrary to tradition by almost the entire Jewish community. The starting point of the argumentation is, in addition to general changes in American synagogues after World War II, the assumption that Los Angeles was the most suitable place for this foundation. Los Angeles has an impressive queer history and the Jewish community was more open, tolerant and innovative here than its counterpart on the East Coast. The Metropolitan Community Church was also founded in the city, and as the largest religious institution for homosexual Christians, it also served as the birthplace of queer synagogues.

Reform Judaism was chosen as the place of institutional integration of the community because a relative openness for such an endeavor was only seen here. Responsa written in response to a potential admission of Beth Chayim Chadashim can be used to understand the arguments and positions of rabbis and psychologists regarding homosexuality and communities for homosexual Jews in the early 1970s.

Ultimately, the commitment and dedication of the congregation and its heterosexual supporters convinced the decision-makers in Reform Judaism. The decisive impulse to question the situation of homosexual Jews in Judaism came from Los Angeles. With its analysis, the publication contributes to the understanding of Queer Jewish History in general and queer synagogues in particular.

Pri ha-Pardes
ISSN 1863-7442

Volume 13
ISBN 978-3-86956-492-0

Universitätsverlag Potsdam

