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THE HISTORY OF *BEIT HAVERIM*

MARTINE GROSS*

Jewish law condemns homosexuality, it is an “abomination”, to quote the Leviticus (18, 22 and 20, 13). Homosexual acts are perceived by orthodox Judaism as a serious violation of Jewish law. Other branches of Judaism¹ interpret the Bible’s verdict more or less severely (Gross, 2007a). Given the apparent incompatibility between Judaism and homosexuality, one might expect that Jewish identity would be kept at arm’s length or that Jewish homosexuals would repress their homosexuality. Yet the very existence of *Beit Haverim*, the Jewish gay and lesbian group of France, contradicts that intuition. How was the group formed and what are its relations with the institutions of the Jewish community in France? The object of this chapter is to retrace the group’s history from the point of view of its relations with the Rabbinic authorities, with the Jewish institutions of France, with other homosexual associations, not forgetting to take into account its members’ expectations as well. The history of *Beit Haverim* as a minority within a minority is emblematic of how the perception of homosexual Jews has evolved, *i.e.* the way they see themselves and the way the Jewish community sees them.

Birth of the association

Beit Haverim (“the House of friends” in Hebrew) was at first and until 1982 a very unobtrusive group. Created in 1977, the group met informally in the premises of the *Centre du Christ Libérateur* founded in 1976 by Joseph Doucé,² a Baptist minister who catered to believers belonging to sexual minorities. Along with *David et Jonathan*, a Christian homosexual movement founded a few years earlier (1972), *Beit Haverim* is one of the oldest LGBT³ groups in France. It is fully a part of the homosexual movement, which it has contributed to transform, and also of today’s “gay plus one”⁴ movement of associations described by Elisabeth Armstrong, who shows how, since the 1950s in San Francisco, gay identity has been built up (Armstrong, 2002). It is significant that the oldest groupings of this type should be religious gatherings such as *David et Jonathan* and *Beit Haverim*. For they allow their members to not only express their homosexuality but also to find support for another of their identities: their religious affiliation (Gross, 2007b, 2015).

During the 1980s *Beit Haverim* gradually developed, so much so that it was able to offer activities that made it resemble a Jewish community in miniature. Its statutes as a 1901 French association⁵ were legally registered at the Prefecture in 1982, the same year that homosexuality was decriminalized in France. Aside from welcoming Jewish homosexuals, its aims are twofold: in order to promote gay and lesbian rights, it has both joined the movement of lesbian, gay, bi and trans associations (LGBT), and attempts to make the existence of homosexual individuals visible inside the Jewish community. The association suffered many losses due to the VIH epidemic of the 1980s. A context of social urgency contributed to giving visibility to homosexual associations and at the beginning of the 1990s demands concerning the recognition of same-sex couples received acknowledgment for the first time. Today *Beit Haverim* brings together one thousand members and friends, for the main part male.⁶

Like a community centre

Beit Haverim defines itself as a cultural and secular - not a religious - association. It does not want to be considered a gay synagogue and wraps itself in the Republican garb of anti-communitarism. Nevertheless, thanks to the activities it organizes, the group plays the role of a miniature Jewish community for its members. Since the 1990s, it has offered its supporters activities usually found in community centres based on shared

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¹ In France, the Jewish Consistory’s orthodox orientation is the majority trend in the Jewish community.

² Joseph Doucé was assassinated in 1990 in circumstances that were never elucidated.

³ Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans.

⁴ For example “gay hikers”, “retired gays”, “LGBT policemen and gendarmes”, etc.

⁵ Officially registered volunteer, non-profit associations in France (Translator’s note).

⁶ In this, *Beit Haverim* closely resembles other LGBT associations, for the main part made of men except for those involved with homoparenting, which count more women among their members.

cultural roots: Jewish holidays, traditions, trips to Poland and Israel, lectures, *ulpan* (Hebrew learning class), cultural and social events, etc. In *Beit Haverim*, a person can concretely live out their dual, Jewish and homosexual, identity. Members meet during festive events (tea-dances) in view of celebrating Jewish holidays, particularly *Rosh Hashanah*, *Purim*, *Pessah* and *Hanukkah*. The association has also opened a telephone line to listen to homosexual Jews who are victims of homophobia, especially in the family.

Since 2008, *Beit Haverim* has been a regular participant of *Limmud*⁷, a forum for Jewish life.

According to the *Beit Haverim* spokesperson, there is presently a growing demand on the part of members for activities that are culturally, traditionally or religiously closer to Jewish identity. Members would for instance like to meet with rabbis, to have religious services, celebrate a *Kiddush* or share a meal on the *Shabbat* or a holiday of the Jewish calendar. This has all become easier since 2009, when the group acquired its own place, “the House of *Beit*”⁸.

The question whether to become a full-fledged Jewish community by developing a pole dedicated to religious observance or not crops up at regular intervals.⁹ According to the spokesperson, the only thing lacking in *Beit Haverim* for it to be a miniature Jewish community is a permanent rabbi (Gross, 2012), something the association would probably be unable to afford. An internal survey carried out in 2012 showed that a third of the association’s membership were in favour of more religious activities, which a rabbi could accompany on a free-lance basis. He or she would most likely represent the Liberal branch, known for being sympathetic to sexual minorities. Paradoxically, however, having a Reformed rabbi has for the moment never been sufficiently consensual. Certain members would prefer an Orthodox, others a *Massorti* rabbi. It reminds one of Groucho Marx’s famous quip: “I don’t want to belong to any club who would have me for a member” (Groucho Marx, 1959, 321). Like many, even non-practicing Jews, certain *Beit Haverim* members seem to find the Orthodox branch more legitimate than the others, especially the Liberals and *Massorti*, likely to welcome gays and lesbians. They look down on those streams as “second-best Judaism” that only converts and mixed couples would adhere to (Tank, 2003).

Talking with the rabbis and public debates

At the end of the 1990s, a dialogue with representatives of the Jewish community got under way with rabbis of various streams, Reformed, *Massorti* and Orthodox, including with Gilles Bernheim, who was to become Chief Rabbi of France (2008-2013)¹⁰. Various forums on religious themes were then organized.

Some events marking Jewish holidays were set up in collaboration with the Movement of Liberal Jews of France (*Mouvement des juifs libéraux de France*, MJLF) or with the Reformed Jewish community: a complete *Shabbat* (*Shabbat plein*), meals, study groups. *Beit Haverim* exchanged not only with Reformed rabbis but equally with rabbis and members of the Orthodox communities and even the Lubavitch. At first the meetings took place within the framework of “spiritual forums” organized by the association. Later, the encounters became more official. Towards the end of the years 2000, lectures followed by debates were organized in one of the Paris town halls with Liberal and *Massorti* rabbis. A Consistory rabbi who had first been approached was in the end not authorized by his hierarchy to participate in such an event. But in 2010, Consistory rabbi Michael Azoulay spoke up during a conference organized for the International Day Against Homophobia in the French National Assembly. Not only did he firmly condemn homophobia in behaviour, he also declared that the Biblical texts concerning homosexuality could be reinterpreted and should be replaced in context. According to him, the Bible’s condemnation bears on homosexual rape or unwanted homosexual acts.¹¹ The same year, at the behest of *Beit Haverim*, Chief Rabbi Gilles Bernheim signed a manifesto against homophobia. That commitment was made known to all the rabbis of the Consistory and for a while could be viewed on the Chief Rabbi’s official website, before disappearing.

In the fall of 2012, debates on same-sex marriage and the possibility for same-sex couples to adopt started to proliferate in France. Reminiscent of the debates surrounding the PACS fifteen years earlier, they stirred up virulent opposition during demonstrations whose magnitude surprised everyone, even lasting through

⁷ *Limmud* is an association whose primary goal is to promote Jewish education and way of life in all its complexity. Since 2006, it organises 3-day forums in France comprising lectures and workshops. [http : www.limoud.org](http://www.limoud.org)

⁸ According to its managers (see *HaMih'tav - Bulletin du Beit Haverim* n°109, January 2009), the “House of Beit” has a triple vocation. “Symbolic: to lead *Beit Haverim* to adulthood, assert our double Jewish and homosexual identity while remaining open to others; Social: to be a welcoming place where Jewish homosexual men and women can find a friendly ear; Practical: to gather under the same roof our association’s office, a documentary and information centre, an informal meeting place where everyone can find friends”. The “House of Beit” was acquired thanks to a bank loan made possible by several years of fundraising among supporters of the association.

⁹ <http://www.beit-haverim.com/index.php/?Débats-et-réflexions/batir-une-communaute-juive-lgbt.html>

¹⁰ The Jewish Consistory (*Consistoire israélite de France*) is directed by a secular president and a Chief Rabbi, both elected. At first willing to accept a pluralistic Judaism, the Consistory became more and more orthodox during the second half of the 20th century.

¹¹ <http://www.beit-haverim.com/index.php/?Judaïsme-et-Homosexualité/discours-du-rabbin-mickael-azoulay.html>

2014 one year after the law was passed. Supported in great part by the Right wing and the Catholic Church, opposition against the projected law also gained followers among representatives of the other religions¹². The public stands against the law taken by the various religious authorities are remarkably consonant (Béraud and Portier, 2015). According to “SOS Homophobia” that publishes a yearly report on the testimony it receives, the manifestation of homophobia reached an unprecedented level during that entire period. At the time the debate on the possibility of same-sex marriage was raging on, Chief Rabbi Gilles Bernheim published an essay against the projected law, titled “Homosexual marriage, Homoparentality and Adoption: what is often omitted” (*«Mariage homosexuel, homoparentalité et adoption: ce que l'on oublie souvent de dire»*). The hostility against homosexuals expressed in this essay is astounding¹³. If the Chief Rabbi is to be believed, their demands concerning marriage and adoption aim to eradicate all sexual differences. Tolerance for homosexuals only reinforces “their role as Trojan horse in their fight against heterosexuality”. By diverse strategies, homosexuals are looking to implement an ambitious project: destroy marriage, combat today’s model of the family, deny sexual differences. Attributing destructive objectives to homosexuals - in total contrast with the Rabbi’s previous declarations - the essay can only astonish. It did not prevent *Beit Haverim* from pursuing the dialogue, however, since at the start of 2015, they once again met with the ex-Chief Rabbi. It might be stressed that, like its Christian counterpart *David et Jonathan*, the association feels it is strategically important to keep talking to the religious authorities.

Beit Haverim does not only meet rabbis individually. Its officials also organize debates within the Jewish community. In November 2013, a debate was organized around the question “Women, gays and lesbians, is Jewish law discriminatory?” Among others, *Beit Haverim* had invited a specialist in Hebrew law, Talmudist and philologist Liliane Vana, Reformed gay rabbi René Pfterzel, and Haim Nissenbaum, a Lubavitch rabbi. The debates were filmed by Akadem and put on their website¹⁴.

Talking with the Jewish institutions¹⁵

In 2002, marking its 25th anniversary, *Beit Haverim* entered the political arena. Its president, Lionel Choukroun, organized a meeting with officials from the Jewish community - the FSJU and the CRIF - but also with representatives of the LGBT movement and political authorities – deputies, senators, mayors, locally elected officials.

During that meeting, Gérard Fredj, head of the FSJU, declared that even if the same differences of opinion probably exist within the Jewish community and the national community, and probably the same ostracism (voiced by some), there was no opposition, nor any impediment when what was at stake was a joint project on Jewish identity. Haim Musicant of the CRIF declared that being a Jewish organization, *Beit Haverim* absolutely was in its place next to all the other Jewish organizations.

Also for that 25th anniversary, *Beit Haverim* applied to enter the CRIF; the answer came two years later (in 2004): due to the private nature of homosexuality and because it is in contradiction with the Torah, the group was not allowed to enter the organization. One might well wonder about the religious motive invoked since the CRIF is supposedly a secular organization. Throwing homosexuality back into the private sphere is a new way of making homosexuals invisible within the Jewish community. To accept an association of homosexual Jews would mean officially acknowledging their existence and recognizing the legitimate nature of that existence, something that neither the CRIF and still less the Consistory seem prepared to do.

¹² See the hearings of the representatives of cults by the Laws Commission in the National Assembly on November 29, 2012, in the Senate on February 12, 2013.

¹³ As was later discovered (Jean-Noel Darde, Archeologie-copier-coller.com) this text plagiarized a book by the Dominican Father Joseph-Marie Verlinde, “The ideology of Gender, imposed or chosen identities?” (*L'idéologie du Gender, Identité reçue ou choisie ?*, Paris, Le Livre ouvert, 2012), after which it no longer figured on the websites of the Jewish community but only on a few Catholic websites, principally www.paris.catholique.fr

¹⁴http://www.akadem.org/sommaire/themes/vie-juive/place-de-la-femme/approche-textuelle/femmes-gays-et-lesbiennes-14-03-2014-58155_385.php

¹⁵ The institutions of the French Jewish community occupy three distinct spheres: the cult, the political and the social-cultural. Each of the spheres developed around or sprang from a centralized institution – respectively the Central Jewish Consistory of France (*Consistoire israélite de France*), the Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions (*Conseil représentatif des institutions juives de France*, CRIF), the United Jewish Welfare Fund (*Fonds social juif unifié*, FSJU). The heads of these institutions are considered by the French public authorities as their main interlocutors. The mission of the Consistory, established in 1808 by Napoleon, was to manage and organise religious life. Due to the historical context when it was created within the framework of recognized faiths, the Consistory controlled the Jewish cult. That framework broke down when the law concerning the separation of Church and State was voted in 1905. However, the Consistory in fact remained central, even if the religious associations of all persuasions, from the ultra-orthodox to liberal Judaism, developed on the margins of the Consistory during the 20th century. The CRIF is a federation of institutions created in 1943, whose self-appointed mission is to defend the interests of Jews confronted by anti-semitism by intervening with the political authorities and French public opinion. The FSJU was created following WWII, with an eye to rebuilding French Jewry. It coordinates and gives financial support to social work, culture and education (Azria, 2010).

Beit Haverim applied a second time in 2006 and was once again turned down. As a result *Beit Haverim* has stopped wanting to belong to the CRIF. The dialogue nevertheless resumed, this time launched by the CRIF itself, at the same time as the Durban Review Conference against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance in 2009 was held. During Durban I in 2001, Israel had come under ceaseless attack due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Throughout the world, the Jewish communities had tried to get better prepared for Durban II. According to its spokesperson, Franck Jaoui, *Beit Haverim* was considered to be an interesting, avant-garde ally in the effort to dismantle the image of a conservative and homophobic Judaism. The group was invited to the CRIF's preparatory meetings. As a result, contacts became more frequent and the CRIF now regularly relays *Beit Haverim's* communiqués on its own website, e.g. about the trip in 2011 to Israel and Palestine along with *David et Jonathan* and *HM2F*, a young association of Muslim homosexuals.

In April 2014 a meeting took place with important members of the CRIF, including its former president Richard Pasquier. Both organizations expressed their wish to consolidate their cooperation in the fight against every sort of discrimination, in particular anti-semitism and homophobia, and to promote the acceptance of homosexual persons within the Jewish community and French society, as well as knowledge about French Jews within the homosexual community.

Today, it is possible to assert that *Beit Haverim* is part of the life of the Jewish community, by its contacts with the rabbis of the various branches as much as by its participation – albeit unofficially - in Jewish institutions.

An activist association that communicates with other LGBT associations

Though this Jewish group of gays and lesbians is not recognized (by the CRIF) as a Jewish association, it is nonetheless recognized as a homosexual association by the Inter-LGBT, the federation that brings together most of the LGBT associations in France and whose main mission it is to reverse public policies in the battle against discriminations, and to organise the annual Gay Pride demonstration. Every year, *Beit Haverim* marches in the middle of the parade. One characteristic feature of the activities organized by *Beit Haverim* is that they are open to non-Jews, in particular to members of other gay and lesbian associations. From the start, there were close ties with the association *David et Jonathan*, a Christian homosexual movement¹⁶. Both associations are among the founding members of the Inter-LGBT.

Within the Inter-LGBT, a very politically oriented and ultra-secular minority feels that religious groups have no place among them. Due to ignorance, some think that *Beit Haverim's* position follows the lines of the Orthodox-leaning Consistory which thus excludes homosexuality as an acceptable way of life. Some, claiming an anti-Zionistic stance, reject *Beit Haverim*, which must therefore focus not only on convincing the representative bodies of Judaism in France but also LGBT associations.

Evening events and trips have been organized in common with *David et Jonathan* and been opened to other LGBT associations. The first trip took place in Israel in 2004. The second, in 2009, was Auschwitz. A third was the trip already mentioned to Israel and Palestine with *David et Jonathan* and *HM2F* in 2011.

Beit Haverim is also a member of “Memory's ‘Forgotten Ones’” (« *Oublié-es* » de la *Mémoire*), a French association dedicated to historical memory that endeavours to uncover cases of persons deported for their homosexuality and strives for their recognition in France and abroad.

The initiative to organize these trips and to reach out to others aimed, on the one hand, to familiarize people with the realities of Israel and combat the Anti-Zionism sometimes expressed in LGBT milieus, and, on the other hand, to share moments of emotion and solidarity with the victims, Jewish as well as homosexual, exterminated by the Nazis. Due to its dual identity, *Beit Haverim* participates in public demonstrations against racism and anti-semitism, in commemorations linked to the deportation of Jews as well as of homosexuals, and also in the Gay Pride or other manifestations linked to the universe of gay and lesbian associations.

Beit Haverim's activism is thus pointed in three directions, one toward the institutions of the Jewish community to incite them to acknowledge homosexual Jews; another toward LGBT associations to both reaffirm its own identity as a Jewish group and familiarize others with Judaism and Israel; the third toward reducing anti-semitism and homophobia and promoting legislation, particularly on marriage, parenting, medically assisted procreation, adoption...

Who are *Beit Haverim* members? What are they looking for?

According to a survey I carried out among *Beit Haverim* members in 2009 two-thirds of the 136 respondents claimed that, though they were non-practicing, Judaism was nevertheless very important for them. For the most part, they define their own Judaism as belonging to a people, a memory, a heritage or a culture. Over two-thirds are completely at ease with their sexuality and live with their double identity serenely; it is a

¹⁶ www.davidetjonathan.com

problem only for the most religious among them or for those whose sexual orientation provoked a break with their family (Gross, 2015).

For some, *Beit Haverim* is the only remaining tie connecting them to Jewish religion or culture. For those who had broken with their family or with the community, *Beit Haverim* has probably played the role of second family.

My 2009 survey showed that over two-thirds had joined the association to find others like themselves, *i.e.* homosexual Jews. As one respondent put it, it is difficult to be Jewish all alone by oneself. Finding a group of people having the two identities in common permits reinforcing them, or even giving Judaism more substance (*e.g.* by observing some of the holidays on the Jewish calendar); it is hard to experience that outside a family when ties have weakened or sometimes even snapped. What Martine Cohen writes is particularly fitting to the situation of homosexual Jews who belong to *Beit Haverim*: “Conservative rabbis can no longer prevent a person from claiming to be Jewish when, though disregarding the religious rules that apply, a group of Jews among whom he/she can begin or continue living the sort of Jewish social life he/she has chosen, recognizes him/her as one of them” (Cohen, 2000).

Beit Haverim's evolution is concomitant with the transformations of the French Jewish world marked by the question of how religion fits into Jewish identity. Though the habitual places for Jewish social life - synagogues, cultural centres – do not permit asserting one's gay or lesbian orientation, *Beit Haverim* not only allows its members to live out their homosexual identities collectively but also to find support for the other facet of their identity, their Jewishness. The various rituals proposed by the association allow them to forge a sense of belonging and assert both dimensions.

Translation by Gabrielle Varro

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