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Title

Rabbi Sandra Lawson Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

October 17, 2018

Extant

2 hours 3 minute interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Rabbi Sandra Lawson, the first openly gay, female, and Black rabbi, discusses following her Jewish heritage despite encountering racism. She discusses building an interfaith and interracial coalition to protest marriage restrictions, and working for the Anti-Defamation League.

Biographical

Rabbi Sandra Lawson (she/her/hers), Associate Chaplain for Jewish life and Jewish Educator at Elon University in North Carolina, is building bridges of connection across differences that seek to silo and isolate.

Raised by loosely Christian parents who moved often due to their military service, young Lawson had no formal religious education as a child. She recalls usually attending church only if others invited her family.

The grandchild of former sharecroppers in the American South, Lawson made a discovery about her lineage when she was a bit older that caused her to reflect on her connection to tradition and spirituality. Her mother's earliest relative in America was not enslaved, but an Ethiopian Jewish immigrant whose practices of not eating pork or shellfish were observed by Lawson's family generations later.

However, it wasn't until college that Lawson began to connect to this part of her heritage. As a sociology major during her undergraduate studies, Lawson enlisted in the United States Army during her junior year and investigated cases of child abuse and domestic violence. Lawson eventually enrolled in a class on Old Testament with Dr Francis Githieya, a rigorous instructor hailing from Kenya who didn't want his students to regurgitate Christian doctrine. Lawson

received an A in his course and would go on to graduate with honors from St. Leo University in Florida, completing her education at a private, Roman Catholic, liberal arts institution.

Some time after completing her studies, Lawson relocated to Atlanta after leaving the military, and became a personal trainer. Working for several years with Jewish clients, making Jewish friends, and having relationships of various intimacies with other Jews came with gifts and anxieties in equal measure. She was able to observe Shabbat with the family of her then-girlfriend, marveling at their hospitality and the way a very modern Jewish family practiced the ancient tradition of Friday evening dinners together. Upon taking Rabbi Joshua Lesser as a client, she found herself invited to his congregation's services, yet anxiety mounted as she imagined she would be one of few, if not the only, Black person in attendance at Congregation Bet Haverim (CBH).

However, upon attending a service and finding the community to be welcoming, complete with active children and a dog, Chance, who was part of the ritual as well, she had found a spiritual home. Completing a course of study typical of conversion with Rabbi Lesser, Lawson received her Hebrew name and entered into covenant with the Jewish people the day before her thirty-fourth birthday.

As the months passed, Lawson stayed in Atlanta and felt that her identities as a Black and lesbian Jew seemed disparate to those unwilling to challenge their own internal biases and assumptions. Following a sermon by Rabbi Lesser about Magnus Hirschfeld, a queer Jew who founded the Institute for Sex Research (whose works were largely destroyed by Nazi book-burning in 1933) in pre-WWII Germany, Lawson reflected on the impact of this single person's actions. How much more resistance could have affected change in Nazi Germany had LGBTQ+ and Jewish communities worked in tandem instead of isolated from each other?

Soon after that, Lawson was asked to represent CBH at a queer memorial service for Coretta Scott King, former wife of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King. After speaking at the event, largely attended by other Black and LGBTQ+ community members, Lawson was approached by a woman who stated she wanted to convert to Judaism. It was then that she realized her impact on the community - as an out lesbian and African-American Jew, Lawson could help people who had anxieties similar to those of her early times with Rabbi Lesser to feel welcomed and visible in Jewish spaces.

With this in mind, in 2011 Lawson became the first African-American and first openly gay African-American accepted to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Pennsylvania. During her matriculation as a rabbinical student, Lawson led Friday night Shabbat services at Arnold's Way Cafe in Lansdale, connecting to community members in a health-conscious environment. She became President of the RRC Student Association by 2016 and received ordination as a rabbi upon graduating in 2018.

Lawson accepted a position at Elon University, a private institution in North Carolina, where she has served in a chaplain and educator position since 2018. In recent years, she has become incredibly active on Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat, using modern platforms to reach Jews of all ages and backgrounds.

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Rabbi Sandra Lawson, the first openly gay, female, and Black rabbi, discusses following her Jewish heritage despite encountering racism. She discusses building an

interfaith and interracial coalition to protest marriage restrictions, and working for the Anti-Defamation League.

This interview was conducted by Dr. Monique Moultrie, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Georgia State University, and author of *Hidden Histories: Faith and Black Lesbian Leadership*. She conducted this interview as a consultant of LGBTQ-RAN as part of the oral histories project.

Access

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/sandra-lawson>

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Languages

Collection material is in English

Custodial History

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Tags

Lawson, Sandra

Black

Atlanta

Clergy Activist

Georgia

Jewish (ethnic, Reform, Reconstructionist, Orthodox)

Jewish (Reconstructionist)