Short Bio

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum has dedicated her life to promoting social justice, LGBTQ+ and human rights, and progressive values within Judaism. She served for 32 years as Senior Rabbi of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in New York City, the largest LGBTQ+ synagogue in the world — for people of all sexual identities and genders — where she is now Senior Rabbi Emerita. The BBC named her one of its 100 Women of 2024, and *Newsweek* named her one of the 50 most influential rabbis in America. President Biden appointed Rabbi Kleinbaum a Commissioner to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Medium Bio 1

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum served for 32 years as Senior Rabbi of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in New York City, the largest LGBTQ+ synagogue in the world — for people of all sexual identities and genders — where she is now Senior Rabbi Emerita. Rabbi Kleinbaum was installed as CBST's first rabbi in 1992, arriving at the height of the AIDS crisis when the synagogue was in desperate need of pastoral care and spiritual leadership.

Rabbi Kleinbaum guided the CBST congregation through loss and change while addressing social issues and building a strong and deeply spiritual community. Under her leadership, CBST became a powerful voice in the movement for equality and justice for people of all sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and a significant force challenging the radical right's dominance over religious and political life in the United States and around the world.

For many years, Rabbi Kleinbaum has been ranked by *Newsweek* among the 50 most influential rabbis in America. The BBC also named her one of its 100 Women of 2024. She has long been involved in the fight for human rights for all people. Rabbi Kleinbaum was appointed by President Biden as a Commissioner to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. She is a Commissioner on New York City's Commission on Human Rights, and served on Mayor Bill de Blasio's Faith Based Advisory Council. Rabbi Kleinbaum is also a member of the Executive Committee of Governor Hochul's Office of Faith and Non-Profit Development Services.

Medium Bio 2

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum is a prominent figure in the Jewish community known for her leadership and advocacy. She has dedicated her life to promoting social justice, LGBTQ+ rights, and progressive values within Judaism.

Rabbi Kleinbaum served for 32 years as Senior Rabbi of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in New York City, the largest LGBTQ+ synagogue in the world — for people of all sexual identities and genders — where she is now Senior Rabbi Emerita. She played a pivotal role in creating an inclusive space where LGBTQ+ Jews could express their faith without fear of discrimination.

Known for her eloquent teachings and passionate advocacy, Rabbi Kleinbaum is a vocal supporter of various causes, including marriage equality, HIV/AIDS awareness, and refugee rights. She often emphasizes the importance of intersectionality and the need for diverse voices within both the Jewish community and broader social movements. Throughout her career, Rabbi Kleinbaum has challenged traditional interpretations of Judaism to align with her progressive values, encouraging a more inclusive and compassionate approach. Her work has had a significant impact on reshaping the narrative around LGBTQ+ inclusion within religious spaces.

As Rabbi Emerita, she continues to inspire and lead, making substantial contributions to the ongoing conversations about faith, identity, and social justice. Her life's work reflects a commitment to fostering understanding, empathy, and positive change within both the Jewish community and society at large.

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Longer Bio

From the start of her career, Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum has held a uniquely individual vision of what a congregational rabbi can be. She built a rabbinate on her lifelong passions for Jewish study, history and prayer, text and tradition, her love for music and literature, her feminism and commitment to LGBTQ liberation, and her determination to erase the bifurcation of spirituality and social justice. In her 32 years at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, she made that vision a reality and a stunning success.

In 1992, Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum became CBST's first rabbi and the first full-time staff person at New York City's then "Gay and Lesbian" synagogue. She arrived during the worst of the AIDS crisis when a lethal combination of viral illness and anti-Gay bigotry left the community perpetually caring for its sick and dying, mourning its losses, and comforting those left behind. The grief-stricken and embittered congregation called out urgently for pastoral support and spiritual guidance. In the three decades it spent under Rabbi Kleinbaum's inspired leadership, CBST became the largest LGBTQ synagogue in the world, a powerful and resilient spiritual community of resistance and love. Now, a quarter-century into the new millennium, CBST's positive impact can be felt throughout New York City, around the USA, in Israel, and worldwide. The stone that the builders dismissed has become a cornerstone of unquestionable significance.

Rabbi Kleinbaum's vision stands on multiple unshakable loyalties. As a pastor, she stands devoted to her community, celebrating *smachot* (joys) and accompanying members through *tsurot* (troubles) great and small. As a service leader on Shabbat and holy days, RSK is renowned for delivering thoughtful and provocative *drashot* (sermons) on the Torah with a trademark blend of humor and solemnity. Rabbi Kleinbaum is both irreverent and profoundly serious. As a teacher, she shares her unquenchable love for sacred text, Yiddish and other Jewish cultures, and the history of Jewish civilization. As a progressive Zionist committed to the shared future of Israeli Jews and Palestinians, she strives tirelessly for security, safety, peace, and liberation for all dwellers of Israel and Palestine.

Few might have predicted back then how CBST would mature and deepen over time, but the shul's evolution reflects opportunities and challenges Rabbi Kleinbaum highlighted in her installation drash sermon) on September 11, 1992. That night, she taught a verse from that week's haftarah: Isaiah 54:1, "Enlarge the size of your tent. Extend the size of your dwelling. Do not stint! Lengthen the ropes and drive the pegs firm." During her tenure at CBST, RSK filled the tent she found and reshaped it into something more glamorous and powerful, but she always kept its foundations solid. Rabbi Kleinbaum's vision, as drawn in that prescient drash in 1992, laid out the roadmap for CBST's future: to be a center for music, to educate children of our families, and to make social justice the clarion call of the community.

In any time of challenge, Rabbi Kleinbaum urges everyone, "Be more Jewish." For RSK, being Jewish means exploring the abundance inherent in Jewish identity. On the first day COVID shut down the world on March 16, 2020, RSK began teaching a Psalms class four days a week for 18 months.

Collaboration has been central to Rabbi Kleinbaum's work. With Rabbi Ayelet Cohen, Rabbi Kleinbaum created a Friday night CBST siddur (prayer book) that simultaneously

is unabashedly traditional and unabashedly Queer. With Music Director Joyce Rosenzweig, RSK made the experience and appreciation of music a central part of CBST's religious and cultural life. Over the years, CBST's community chorus grew stronger and musically more sophisticated under Joyce's inspiring leadership, and concerts of Broadway, Yiddish, Jewish liturgical and secular music, and classical chamber music became part of the regular rhythm of CBST's yearly calendar. With Rabbi Benay Lappe, RSK created the Lehrhaus Judaica, a center for adult Jewish learning.

Rabbi Kleinbaum oversaw the expansion of CBST's membership from its founding community of adults who sought a place where they could be both openly Lesbian and Gay and proudly Jewish. The membership grew to include families with children, trans and non-binary people, Jews of color, Jews in their 20s and 30s who weren't born when the founding generation first gathered. Under Rabbi Kleinbaum's supervision emerged CBST's religious school and flourishing b*mitzvah program for young teens, which – because of CBST's unique origin story – developed well after the congregation's adult b*mitzvah program.

CBST learners of all ages have traveled the world with Rabbi Kleinbaum through many congregational trips to Israel, Eastern Europe, Washington D.C., and civil rights tours of the American South. Her boundless fascination with history has blended with her understanding that Jewish and LGBTQ+ history is world history. Through her teaching, the congregation has come to see its broad cultural heritage and the extent of its impact and legacy.

With the caring support of long-time CBST member William Fern, Rabbi Kleinbaum designed and created the Cooperberg-Rittmaster Rabbinical Internship Program in 1994, recognized as the finest training program anywhere in the world for student rabbis and cantors. She has personally mentored over 50 program alums, who now serve in myriad capacities around North America, Europe, and Israel. Beginning in 2012, her rabbinical alma mater, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, has selected one student for the Kleinbaum Congregational Internship – modeled on the CRRI program RSK created – supporting that student's development under rabbinical mentorship in a congregational setting. Finally, not only has CBST grown into a congregation that weekly yearns to celebrate Shabbat together, Rabbi Kleinbaum successfully led the community through the process of building its own holy, highly visible space in midtown Manhattan, which CBST has called home since 2016.

Since first engaging Reuben Zellman, the first openly trans rabbinical student, as CBST's educator (2004) and then as a Cooperberg-Rittmaster Rabbinical Intern, Rabbi Kleinbaum has been committed to the emerging trans and nonbinary communities at

CBST. Upon learning that LGBTQ ally, Haredi Rabbi Mike Moskowitz was fired from his positions for advocating for Orthodox Judaism to respect and celebrate trans and LGBTQ lives, RSK brought Rabbi Moskowitz to CBST as a scholar-in-residence. Rabbi Kleinbaum is deeply committed to the huge range of Jewish practice, observance, and belief, reflected in her commitment to having clergy and interns from all movements, backgrounds, and spiritual orientations reflect the many faces of God.

Crucial to this moment in history, CBST has become a community committed to open dialogue among Jews and between Jewish community and communities of other faiths. Rabbi Kleinbaum's unique focus and guidance in this area have created a bond with members of the Islamic community in New York City, and have made CBST a place where support of Israel includes thoughtful and sometimes highly critical responses to Israel's policies, including towards the Palestinian people within its borders and within the occupied West Bank and Gaza. Rabbi Kleinbaum was the founding co-chair with Rabbi Gerald Serotta of Rabbis for Human Rights North America in 2002, which later changed its name to T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. Rabbi Kleinbaum has played a significant role in working with the many communities in Israel fighting for human rights for all.

Rabbi Kleinbaum's name has appeared multiple years on Newsweek's list of America's 50 most influential rabbis. The BBC named her one of the 100 Women of 2024. She was appointed by President Joseph R. Biden to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. Rabbi Kleinbaum has served as a Commissioner on New York City's Commission on Human Rights and has been a member of Mayor Bill de Blasio's Faith-Based Advisory Council and serves on the Executive Committees of Governor Hochul's Office of Faith and Non-Profit Development Services and the New York State Interfaith Council (NYSIC).

Rabbi Kleinbaum is a co-founder and Board member of New York Jewish Agenda, a Board member at Interfaith Center of New York, a Co-Chair of the Rabbinic Council of JStreet, has served on the Boards of GMHC, New Israel Fund, and is a member of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Women's Rabbinical Network, and J Street's Clergy Advisory Council. In 2006, she was North American Chair of World Pride.

Rabbi Kleinbaum is the former Assistant Director of the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, and Director of Congregational Relations of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington, D.C. She received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, Honoris Causa, from Hebrew College, and an honorary Doctor of Divinity (DDiv) from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Rabbi Kleinbaum is also an Adjunct Instructor at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS).

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum is married to Randi Weingarten and has two daughters, one son-in-law, two granddaughters, and many beloved nieces and nephews who have their own fabulous children.