Musings on Interfaith Dialogue

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On trying to honor my pledge to work on behalf of the Jewish project with the Christian world

In 1964, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik set out in an article his misgivings on interfaith dialog, and particularly his opposition to theological discussions between Jews and Christians. At the time, the State of Israel was in its infancy and mainly ignored or rejected by the Christian world. After all, it was this Christian world who were responsible for the Shoah, especially in Germany and Eastern Europe. But, as the 21st century dawned, the Roman Catholic Church woke up to the fact that Jews now had their own State and were a serious political entity. So, at the turn of the millennium, Pope John Paul II asked the Chief Rabbinate of Israel to engage with the Vatican.

Chief Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen of Haifa was tasked by the Chief Rabbis of the State of Israel to lead this 'charge' on behalf of the State of Israel. In February 2006, he made what is now considered to be the definitive statement on working with the Christian communities. This statement can be found in the English-language version of his biography, *Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen: Between War and* Peace (tr. Irene Lancaster, Urim, 2017, p 295).

‘The question of how far we should go in inter religious dialog compels us to draw a fine line and walk with great care. On the one hand we seek ‘rapprochement’, to get close to the ‘other’ through ‘paths of pleasantness’ and ‘ways of peace.’ On the other hand, we have to step back in order to emphasize our own distinctiveness…. Anyone involved in inter religious relations needs to set out beforehand a clear set of parameters, so that both parties know from the outset what is distinctive to our own religion and what is part of our ‘mission’ toward the wider world. In other words, we have to be clear about the difference between *yichud* (distinctiveness) and *yi’ud* (mission)’.

Chief Rabbi Shear Yashuv also stipulated that the Vatican sign a solemn agreement beforehand: dialog should not contain any debate or disputes on the core issues of each other’s faith, and the dialog should deal only with shared values; and any hint of an agenda aimed at conversion should be abandoned.

We shall see how these commitments were effectively abandoned over the years; and the Church of England, about which more later, never even got to the point of making any such commitments. But of all this I knew absolutely nothing when I found myself thrown willy- nilly into this arena.

Not that I was unfamiliar with anti-Jewish prejudice. The child of two Polish Holocaust survivors, starting afresh in a small seaside resort near Liverpool, my first negative encounter with the Christian religion (apart from snide remarks from neighbors to my mother) came in compulsory Religious Education lessons at school.

We Jewish girls were exempt from New Testament lessons, but had to attend ‘Old Testament’. One day, aged 14, I sat in a class where the local Church of England clergyman was about to tell us about ‘Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’. I was astounded when he wagged his finger at me and informed the entire class that I had ‘*deliberately, and with malice aforethought, murdered our Lord Jesus*.’

This happened more than once: I informed the teacher in charge of pastoral care, who took me immediately to the school Principal. I told her that I was unable to attend further classes with someone who didn’t stick to his curricular brief, and would, therefore, have no option but to leave the school. The Principal - though a committed member of the Church of England - was clear in her response; I never encountered this clergyman again.

Since then, whenever I've encountered bullying, bystanderism, or worse from Christian clerics and laity, I think back to that fine lady (still going strong in a suburb of Liverpool at 95 years of age), who, to my mind at least, represented the best of authentic British spirit. She set the tone for the school: despite daily bullying from some other girls, I have never, before or since, encountered such a philosemitic and empathic set of educators as our teachers.

All these potential hurdles were helpful for my later work with the churches, the universities, the Press and other environments hostile to Judaism.

In the 1970s, newly married with a baby, I had the opportunity to learn biblical Hebrew properly with a local rabbi, whose rabbinical colleague later recommended me as tutor in Hebrew to a training college for Christian clergy. After moving back to Liverpool, we embarked on a year's sabbatical in Israel. There, near Yad Vashem and the beautiful Jerusalem Forest, I had a 'now or never' moment: there was a seminary for women (mainly from North America) nearby, and I enrolled for intensive learning in the Hebrew-language section, and learned a great deal of Tanach, Jewish thought and modern Hebrew. Another nearby seminary provided advanced Tanach study and even Gemara, as well as Jewish philosophy. Meanwhile, I also devised my own course in Ivrit, to benefit both my elder daughter, aged 8, who was struggling at school in Jerusalem, where no assistance was offered to newcomers from abroad, and myself (it involved the first series of *Sesame Street* - *Parparim*, i.e. 'Butterflies' – in its Israeli version).

The effort was not in vain. On return to Liverpool, I substituted on one occasion for a sick Israeli shaliach as an Ivrit teacher, and was informed that the class unanimously wanted me to carry on as their regular teacher. Soon after, in 1986, I received an unexpected phone call from Liverpool University, inviting me to teach Hebrew at this august institution.

I decided to be totally honest, and informed the Director that I had no qualifications whatsoever in Hebrew, apart from seminary study in Jerusalem, and an excellent advanced Ulpan in the same city.

'*Exactly'*, they said. '*What's good enough for the Jewish community is good enough for us*.'

It seems that one of my modern Hebrew students, a secretary in the Medical Department at Liverpool University, had recommended me to the secretary to the Director of Continuing Education, So, on one very rainy evening in the fall of 1986, I turned up to Liverpool University to give my first lesson in Ivrit.

For the only time of my life, I can say that at Liverpool University I never once encountered, in eleven glorious years of teaching Biblical Hebrew, modern Hebrew (yes, we added that as a subject eventually), Jewish thought, Jewish literature, and the rudiments of Jewish mysticism, the least iota of antisemitism. Some of my former students went on to become Church leaders, or sincere friends of Israel. One or two even converted to Judaism.

There was one snag. By 'Hebrew', the University had meant Biblical Hebrew. But as I always start with the same Hebrew alphabet for both Biblical and Modern Hebrew, that was no great problem. But in the years that followed it became increasingly obvious that my Jewish students preferred to study modern Hebrew, whereas, on the whole, the Christians preferred Biblical Hebrew. So, at the end of the day, the Biblical Hebrew classes came to be dominated by Christians. And this is how I began to engage with the Church.

The Director of the Centre encouraged me to embark on a PhD, and even helped find me a supervisor. In 1989 I had, to my great surprise, been invited by the Spanish Government to the first major conference on Abraham ibn Ezra, marking the 900th anniversary of his birth in Tudela, northern Spain. The conference was held there and in Madrid and Toledo.

I had also been teaching a course about the Jews of medieval Spain to the Jewish community of Liverpool, but ibn Gabirol and Yehuda HaLevi were my favorites, mainly because of their poetry and philosophy. It was a chance meeting at this 1989 Spanish conference that led to an invitation by the great Professor Haim Beinart of the Hebrew University to a major world conference to be held in Jerusalem later that year, where I was introduced to Moshe Idel, not yet the famous Professor of Kabbalah that he later became.

So that is how I embarked in middle age on my PhD on ibn Ezra, which later led to a book. Alas, my Jewish supervisor, the greatest expert on medieval Muslim thought in the UK, had just lost a case

against another university in Liverpool for gross anti-Semitic behavior (which I had also witnessed), and moved for good to the USA.

But around the same time, the Professor of Spanish at Cambridge University recommended me to an academic publisher specializing in translations of medieval texts (including unpublished material) from Spain. These publishers turned out to be related to the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, married to an Oxford academic. And when the publishers informed me that their sister-in-law had won the Nobel Peace Prize for 1991, I decided to help her cause. We founded the Liverpool Burma Support Group at my kitchen table, assisted by Burmese refugees and exiles in the area, as well as some of my adult university students from the Hebrew courses.

We were a mix of Jews, Christians, Muslims and Buddhists, all working together as one for the sake of the Burmese people. The Anglican Bishop of Liverpool's chaplain and the chaplain to the Roman Catholic Archbishop were both especially proactive. I was amazed and honored to receive a personal invitation from the Norwegian Nobel Committee to attend the event where Aung San Suu Kyi's son accepted the Nobel Prize on her behalf. Once in Oslo, I was also invited by the Nobel Committee to attend the parallel 90th Anniversary Celebrations for all preceding living Nobel Peace Laureates, where I was able to meet Eli Wiesel (Peace Laureate 1986), whose works I'd just introduced to the curriculum at Liverpool University, as well as the Dalai Lama (Peace Laureate 1989), who informed me that Israel was 'the best country in the world', and that, given the ongoing struggle faced by contemporary Israelis in a hostile world, only the Jewish people could understand the plight of the Burmese people.

In 2004, the Dalai Lama reiterated these positive sentiments about Israel in Liverpool's gigantic Anglican Cathedral, when asked by the Dean of the Cathedral to condemn the Jewish people for their 'violence'. The reply was that the Church could learn a great deal from the Jewish people, and should repent by embarking with Jews on pilgrimages to Jerusalem - 'the capital of the State of Israel', he added, to general consternation.

However, the 1990s saw the beginning of an escalation in the public denigration of Jews and Judaism in the UK. It was during this time that the UK, which until 1958 had recorded more people leaving the

country than arriving, opened its doors to an increasing number of Muslim immigrants, many from global terrorist hotspots, and later to East European immigrants from post-Soviet newly-constituted independent countries that had just joined the European Union. Many of these newcomers brought with them extreme anti-Jewish sentiments; some refused to learn English, and had no point of reference outside their own language and culture, thus reinforcing their anti-Semitism, while at the same time, Jews slipped further and further down the radar of the British Establishment. More Jews began leaving for Israel, a trend which increased after 9/11, when the BBC and most of the left-leaning Press, the universities, the Churches and the unions, intensified their attacks on the UK Jewish community; it seemed that we (all 250,000 of us) were being blamed for all the ills of the planet.

By this time, my family had moved to Manchester, which had a far bigger Jewish community than Liverpool. In the year 2000, I was invited to start the new subject of Jewish history at Manchester University. This proved a sad contrast to Liverpool. Antisemitism was rife in the University; Islamist societies spouted hatred with impunity, and the Christians who ran the Department of Theology and Religions did nothing to protest; nor did those whose job it was to prevent racism on campus (they often proved to be part of the problem). And too often, Jewish staff and students simply accepted this, without even the semblance of a fight.

When the book on Ibn Ezra was published in 2003, I embarked on a series of book launches around the world, starting of course with the Jewish community of Manchester, my home town, to be followed by Glasgow, Dublin, Florida and lastly Jerusalem. In that year, Cambridge University invited me as Visiting Lecturer in Jewish Studies to teach about Ibn Ezra, and also offered to host their own launch of my book. While there, I noted the fear on the faces of Jewish students – and the ridiculous denials by Jewish staff that anything was wrong. From Cambridge, I went directly to an educators' conference at Yad Vashem on teaching the Shoah, where the main speaker was Professor Robert Wistrich, formerly of University College London. Robert was regarded as the greatest expert on antisemitism in the world, advisor on the subject to the White House and the Vatican, alike. After his session (in which he argued that the UK was now the most anti-Semitic country in Europe), Robert took me aside and said that it was my duty as an academic to put my life on the line and to spend the rest of my days working on behalf of the Jewish community. Having suffered discrimination at UCL, he could speak with authority on the UK situation. The problem, he said, was fourfold: in ascending order, the unions,

the left-wing media (especially the BBC), the churches (which he stated were ‘absolutely dire’) and, worst by far, the universities. People needed information and guidance to take on these powerful vested interests – which is where academics like myself came in. But, he said the Jewish institutions tasked with defense of the Jewish community had completely sold the pass. I promised him that, on return to the UK, I would do my best.

Back in England, it was a case of where to start. I decided that the unions were too difficult to tackle (later, most of the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn’s, supporters and major parliamentary backers were to come from a union background tinged with prejudice against Jews and Israel). For similar reasons, the universities were impossible to engage with - and, depressingly, the Jewish academics still teaching at universities, especially those in Jewish Studies departments, colluded with the situation, passively accepting the Jewish lot in life.

So, the two institutions that were left to tackle from Robert’s list were the Churches and the media. At this point, there was talk in the Church of England about disinvestment from Israel (a matter I’ll come back to). The assistant rabbi of my Shul approached all the Greater Manchester Bishops (I still have a copy of the letter) recommending me as a regular shul-goer ‘of the utmost integrity and outstanding academic credentials’, with an unrivalled knowledge of the State of Israel. He added that I was totally supported by the entire Jewish community in all my work, ‘and in particular in relation to the proposal by the Church of England to disinvest in Israel.’

This letter led to an invitation to visit by one of the Assistant Bishops of Manchester, a strong supporter of Israel. The Diocesan Bishop himself also took supportive steps. He moved sideways one Assistant Bishop who was a consistent and vocal critic of Israel, and asked me to give a talk to the Anglican Diocese on why the very large Orthodox Jewish community of Greater Manchester refused to dialog with the Church, where I spoke not only about the two-millennium history of violence and bigotry but about the contemporary sympathy of the Church with Islam. At the same time, I was formally requested by the Jewish community of Greater Manchester to review the Church Press on a weekly basis – especially Anglican, Roman Catholic, Baptist and Methodist outlets.

To my near-despair, I found no willingness to engage with the Jewish project or with contemporary Jewish experience. I challenged the Anglican *Church Times* (which a professional Israeli academic monitoring service listed among the 20 worst organs of antisemitism world-wide) on their coverage, to be told by the Deputy Editor that the paper's position on Israel was 'in line with our readership.' But the Features Editor invited me to write a number of articles, starting with what was wrong with the Church in the UK (in the end, I wrote five major articles over the decade that followed). However, the main thrust of the paper, read by every Anglican of note in this country, remained highly negative towards Jews and Judaism.

During this period, the BBC asked me to make a program about Judaism. It was very hard going, and reinforced the sense of a massive vested interest hostile to the Jewish community. To make matters worse, incidentally, there is a well-trodden path from journalism to the headship of Oxbridge colleges, so that anti-Jewish prejudices were likely to be confirmed in Higher Education institutions, especially the so-called 'cream' of our educational system.

Why bother with the Church at all, you might ask? Fewer than 2% of the population attended church in cities like London and Manchester. But the Church remains 'by law established', the Archbishop of Canterbury takes precedence after the Royal Family in British protocol, and a number of bishops sit as of right in the legislature and are able to influence attitudes and policies. A sense of entitlement is built in - a stark contrast to the situation in the US. The Queen is still 'Supreme Governor' of the Church of England. This survival of the union between Church and State is the real reason for bothering to be involved with a failing institution.

I mentioned earlier the disinvestment question. In February 2006, the General Synod – the supreme deliberative body of the Church of England – passed a motion recommending disinvestment from a company active in Israel (and this only a week after Hamas had taken power in Gaza!). The wording of parts of the motion, as well as the tone of the debate, together with the action proposed, were marked by the influence of the BDS agenda. The vote seriously soured Anglican-Jewish relations, and was regarded by many as the worst setback in rapprochement for over 50 years. I persistently made representations to the Ethical Investment Advisory Group of the Church Commissioners (who made the final decision); without such representations the motion might have been implemented, and could

well have influenced government policy in the Middle East. In the event, on this occasion, we managed to halt proceedings.

But there were many negative experiences. Friends in the neighboring county of Yorkshire, informed me that of over 1000 letters written by the Jewish leadership in that area to the Archbishop of York and his Assistant Bishops, as well as to local clergy, requesting meetings to put the record straight, only *three* had been answered. The 1190 York Massacre, mourned by the world-wide Jewish community every Tisha B'Av, seems not to have registered with the present-day Church there. Even recently, the latest Archbishop shortly after his appointment stated that Jesus was 'black'; while he explained that he meant simply that Jesus was 'not a white European', the phraseology could be taken to deny the historical Jewishness of Jesus, and many criticized his comments on these grounds He has also more recently used language redolent of religious compulsion.

'*McDonald's makes hamburgers, Cadbury's makes chocolate. Starbucks makes extremely horrible coffee. Heineken makes beer. Toyota makes cars. Rolex makes watches. The church of Jesus Christ makes disciples. That is our core business.'* (reported by Kaya Burgess in The Times of London, August 2nd, 2022).

Nothing about fear of sin, love of truth, piety, humility, studying, learning, guarding one's tongue, listening to the other, debate, 70 faces, love of one's fellow human beings … No wonder, therefore, that there is a stream of would-be converts of all ages, religions, ethnicities and walks of life currently clamoring to become Jewish through the extremely strict Greater Manchester Orthodox Bet Din - and ironically, quite a few of these would-be converts to Judaism themselves come from black Christian backgrounds! Do we actively encourage converts? Of course not. But what is a person trying to find a religious home to do if the 'State Church' is failing so conspicuously?

Meanwhile, I had concluded that it was time to leave the UK. From August 2006 until February 2008 I lived in Israel and experienced first-hand how well the minorities (comprising between 20 and 25% of the Israeli population) were actually doing. Haifa University was full of Muslim, Christian and Druze professors heading every department under the sun. I was invited to input into the University's Arab-Jewish Center, whose Director was a Muslim mayor from a nearby village. He asked me to get the

British not to boycott Haifa University. ‘Where will I go, if they close us’, he asked?

Shortly after arriving in the war-torn city in the middle of the Second Lebanon War, I was invited for Shabbat by the Chief Rabbi of Haifa and his wife. This was in October 2006, just after the Yom Tovim had ended. Back in the UK, the Church leadership and various political pundits from across the spectrum were blaming Israel for the latest hostilities from Hezbollah – unaware, apparently, of the sights I saw, a third of Haifa’s population having to flee, PTSD affecting people of all ages.

That evening I was greeted by Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen with the question, ‘*What do you think about the Church of England?*’ I thought I had misheard. But this is Israel - no small talk at all, no words of welcome, straight down to brass tacks (I later learned that he had been alerted by the Chief Rabbi in the UK to my work for the Jewish project). I answered in kind: ‘*They hate us*.’

‘*Yes, I know*’, said the Chief Rabbi, *but what are they really like*? *They want me to be part of a new Anglican-Jewish Commission,’* he said*.’ Should I do it, or not?’*

This was a man who didn’t shy away from a challenge. As we’ve seen, he had already headed a similar delegation with the Vatican, so was in fact the chief interfaith representative of the Chief Rabbinate of the State of Israel. I explained something of the role of the Church of England and how it differed from the Roman Catholic Church. In the end, Rabbi Shear Yashuv went ahead with this venture of rapprochement. While he was alive, things went reasonably well with the Church of England. We even wrote a joint article about this sudden change of heart by the Church of England for the *Church Times*.

But since his death, his mistrust has been shown not to be misplaced. In November 2015, both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the present Bishop of Manchester made very public and widely-reported comments which assimilated the Isis attacks in France to the murderous behavior of Jewish ‘zealots’ at the time of Jesus (as reported in the Christian Scriptures). Neither agreed to meet to discuss, let alone to retract, their statements. I was pressured not to make public criticism of these two prelates. But associating Jews with the murderous activities of Isis, in which contemporary Jewish people were targeted by this Islamist organization, is to invite huge negative repercussions for Jewish communities.

More recently, the Archbishop of Canterbury has used highly inflammatory language in written criticisms of the State of Israel (particularly in respect of the treatment of Christian communities), and refused to retract when faced with incontrovertible evidence to the contrary.

Meanwhile, the situation in the Roman Catholic Church has also deteriorated. In August 2021, Pope Francis gave an address in which (reworking some words of St Paul) he spoke of the Jewish Law as 'dead' or bringing death. This effectively tore up 60 years of apparent Catholic repentance, and wholly undermined the undertakings made at R Shear Yashuv's insistence fifteen years before, as well as the Second Vatican Council's statements in the sixties, by implying that there is no spiritual nourishment in Judaism. Such a theology of contempt trickles down from the hierarchy to the 'lower orders', of course.

Beyond a few statements of protest from Israeli rabbis, there was little reaction to this. In contrast, when Pope Benedict seemed to be backsliding in his attitude to the Jewish community, Chief Rabbi Shear Yashuv had simply broken off relations with the Vatican - with the result that he became the first rabbi in history to be invited to address assembled bishops at the Vatican, which he did in 2008! But the Chief Rabbinate of Israel no longer seems to be the spiritual inheritor of Rav Kook, Rabbi Herzog, Rabbi Uziel and Rabbi Eliyahu.

Roman Catholics may feature far more prominently in the Jewish psyche than Anglicans; but we can recognize in both the same old tired anti-Semitic warhorses. Wherever Jews appear to be weak, the forces bent on destroying the Jewish people will rush in, which is why it is tremendously important that Israel remain strong, both physically and spiritually. If only the Anglo-Jewish community of the UK would also see the light and act accordingly in its relations with the State Church over here.

So should we all give up and go the only place we can think of as home – to Israel? A large and growing proportion of my own community and district have voted with their feet. My children have already left this country and are living happily in Israel. And now during and post Covid, many of my closest friends from this area have followed them.

But this is not quite the whole story. After returning to Manchester in 2008, encouraged by my younger daughter, I started a fortnightly dialog group between learned Jews and Christians, which is

still going strong and, since Covid, has even attracted new online participants from all over the UK, as well as from North America and Israel.

Meanwhile, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, having retired to become Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, hosted and chaired the book launch of my English-language version of the biography of Rabbi Cohen (the Chief Rabbi had specifically wanted me to undertake this work on the basis of his knowledge of my record as a translator and a scholar). The book launch (at the end of January 2017) was a marvelous event; but unfortunately, at the same time, an issue arose about the infamous Holocaust denier, David Irving. I had been invited to visit Churchill College Cambridge (twinned with Haifa Technion), and there discovered a copy of one of Irving's chillingly anti-Semitic books on display in the College's Churchill Library. Bad enough; but openly anti-semitic fliers in the city of Cambridge were another matter entirely. It was clear that university cities were a major problem. Along with Rowan Williams, I worked to try and challenge this situation in other universities, including Manchester, where, once again, Irving's books could be found filed under 'History' as if they were reliable sources for fact.

Despite my record as a teacher in the University, the Manchester University leadership refused to budge., A leading Jewish psychiatrist and myself visited the university, where we were informed that we were trying to prevent 'free speech', and that in any case both the Council of Christians and Jews and the University Department of Religions and Theology, led (they said) by a Jew, completely supported the university.

Rowan Williams wrote to the Vice Chancellor (she hadn't agreed to see me) and received the response that she was following the Jewish Studies Department in her decision. The upshot was that David Irving on his website thanked the University of Manchester profusely for housing his works as real history. I had the same treatment on his website as his legal nemesis, Professor Deborah Lipstadt. And Manchester University, the largest in Europe, is now widely regarded as a 'no-go' area for Jews.

There is a similar story to be told about York University, whose library also housed Holocaust Denial material - though in this case, a Jewish university student was eventually awarded compensation for the anti-Semitism he had experienced at the hands of students, university authorities and the Christian

chaplains alike.

Around this time, the UK Press reported that only eight universities out of around 150 were regarded as ‘safe spaces’ for Jews, thus depriving Jewish students of the choice that was available to students from other backgrounds. At least three of these eight have been found more recently to have forfeited that confidence; one of the favored eight has also had to compensate a Jewish student for gross and persistent antisemitism. Neither the State Church nor the institutions devoted to protecting the Jewish community have made any effective intervention in all this.

In May 2017, I was invited by Ruth Gledhill, then editor of the global website, *Christian Today*, to contribute fortnightly ‘scholarly articles on Judaism’ in a popular style. My first article appeared just after the Manchester bombing of May 22nd 2017, in which, at a highly-advertised Ariana Grande concert, 22 children and young people were murdered by a Muslim bomber with links to the Didsbury Mosque (which had recently entered into a link with Manchester’s Anglican Cathedral). In the last couple of years, Rowan Williams and I have collaborated in a number of joint articles on sometimes controversial topics for *Christian Today*, which I hope have done something to dispel misinformation about the Jewish project.

A by-product of this was that Rowan who, in November 2021, was to give an address at the Glasgow CoP 26 conference, asked me for the three main points I would make from a Jewish point of view on the subject of the environment. I chose Rashi’s famous comment on the first words of *Bereshit* and the first fruits, as well as the passages in Humash on Shemitta and the Jubilee Year, with its cancellation of debts and the freeing of slaves and prisoners. Rowan’s talk focused entirely on these subjects in their Tanach context, reiterating more than once that Jesus of course had been Jewish, and that his teachings were all Jewish teachings (a little later, Rowan repeated the substance of this talk at a seminar with the Secretary General of the United Nations).

At the same time, our own dialog group, after 14 years of studying in depth the 2000-year history of Jewish-Christian relations, decided that we needed to look at contemporary Jewish history in North America, too big a topic for me to tackle on my own. By great serendipity, I had made contact once again with one of my original Jerusalem teachers, the now very famous and radical Rabbi Nathan

Lopez Cardozo. His daughter had invited me to the synagogue in South Manchester where her husband had been appointed as rabbi, to be the scholar in residence over the May 2018 Shavuot weekend, and the subject was to be conversion in Judaism. Despite the rival attractions of the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle (no-one in Church or State having noticed the clash with Shavuot, it seems…) quite a crowd turned up to hear my talk on the Book of Ruth and how we should welcome converts. And in my spare time that weekend, I devoured the latest book by my former teacher, *Jewish Law as Rebellion*, and, frankly, couldn't put it down (I later reviewed it for *Christian Today*).

In the Fall of 2020, when were all in lock-down, Rabbi Cardozo was due to speak online to a synagogue in Detroit hosted by Rabbi Asher Lopatin, who welcomed me with open arms to his Zoom presentation with Rabbi Cardozo, and then agreed to be the first North American speaker for our dialog group, concentrating on the history of American Orthodoxy in the last 150 years.

This was followed by Rabbi Eli Spitz of Orange County, California, giving us a similar Zoom talk on the Conservative movement in the USA, and finally Rabbi Raachel Jurovics from North Carolina, a Renewal Rabbi. All the Americans encountered as part of our dialog work were open, erudite, friendly and, frankly, a complete breath of fresh air. Rabbi Eli invited me to participate in his wonderful Covid-inspired online Psalm-a-Day series for his congregants. Rabbi Raachel introduced me to her husband, Dr Steve Jurovics, who talked to our group about his book, which advocated Tanach-based environmental issues for churches. I reviewed this book too for *Christian Today*.

And then the largest faith-based environmental group in the world, *Hazon*, contacted me from the USA. In an extraordinary coincidence, its founder, Nigel Savage, was born around the corner in North Manchester, and I had even taught at one time in his school. On top of this, the rabbi for *Hazon* was a UK native, now living in Israel, who had been the Jewish chaplain at Cambridge University around 20 years earlier, during my various book launches and spell as visiting lecturer. Nigel met our group online to talk about how to 'let go' in our lives, and Rabbi Yedidya Sinclair also agreed to talk to us on environmental issues. Later, I reviewed his own new book on Rav Kook's thinking, which included brilliant translations of some of Rav Kook's meditations on Shemitta.

The fourth contributor on this issue was former President of the Jewish Vegetarian Society of North America, Professor Richard Schwartz, also now living in Israel, whose book on vegetarianism I again agreed to review for *Christian Today*. So I was not totally surprised when *Hazon* asked to partner with our own Broughton Park Jewish-Christian Dialog Group and invited me to write a guest article for their Shemitta publication. As all this took place just before CoP 26 in Glasgow, it brought me some added kudos in the field of Jewish environmental thinking!

These new contacts helped with a very pressing situation affecting Londoners living in the area around Parliament. The tiny World Heritage park just outside Parliament was marked out by developers for the construction of a massive 'Holocaust Memorial'. I turned to all my new friends in North America and Israel. Everyone I knew from the Conservative Synagogue Psalm group in Orange County, California, including their wonderful Rabbi (a friend of Eli Wiesel), gladly signed our letter of protest, as did Rabbi Raachel and her husband, along with Professor Schwartz, Rabbi Sinclair, and my neighbors and friends from Greater Manchester, some of whom had recently made Aliyah. Most of these signatories were either Holocaust survivors themselves, or came, like myself, from Holocaust survivor or refugee families. Rowan Williams and the local Anglican Area Dean of that part of London offered support, and Rowan and I wrote several joint articles and letters about what is really needed to increase awareness of the Jewish project - destroying a World Heritage park not being the most obvious option in the struggle to stem British antisemitism. The great Eli Wiesel had told me over thirty years ago at the 1991 Nobel Celebration in Oslo that constructions are not the answer; the answer is what I was doing in Liverpool – education, education and more Jewish education, bringing the Jewish project into the school curriculum at all levels. This country doesn't have the will or the inclination to do this, and changing the mind of the British Establishment is no small task. But for the help and solidarity of all our friends, we can be truly grateful.

There have been other projects where working together has proved to be fruitful. Rowan asked me to help with a choice of Jewish poetry for a new anthology of religious poems. [I steered him towards several names, so that we could include not only Paul Celan's poems of agony and darkness, but also the great Yiddish poet, Avrom Sutzkever, fighter in and survivor of the Vilna Ghetto, as well as others who mainly wrote in Hebrew, such as Bialik, Rav Kook and Amichai.] I made suggestions for interpreting Paul Celan's German and did some draft translations of Hebrew and Yiddish from scratch.

So, yes, in the field of 'thought' – philosophy, poetry, not to mention public matters on which we tend to agree – there can be a certain meeting of minds. But problems persist. A couple of years ago, I was asked by an Anglican clergy training college to lead some sessions on Hebrew Scripture for their students. But it was a different experience from my work with trainee clergy all those years ago in the seventies. Students – and staff - would ask why Judaism is 'such a violent religion'. I was taken aback by the ignorance of Hebrew Scripture and the unexamined stereotyping of 'Jewish legalism' and other unfounded tropes displayed by prospective clergy (as by their superiors). Progress at grass roots in knowledge of Judaism seems if anything to have reversed, even on matters - like 'evangelizing' Jews - which we thought had been settled.

There are voices in the USA, Jewish as well as Christian, which seem to be sympathetic to a closer rapprochement between State and religion, But for Orthodox Jews to come closer to evangelicals and the Catholic Church, both of which at source do not wish us well, is not healthy, given the very small size of the Jewish diaspora community. Aligning with the style and values of proselytizing faiths like Islam and Christianity does Judaism no favors.

Here in the UK the two main political parties will exploit reference to 'the Jews' to advocate their own very different political agendas. This is damaging for us. The truth is that people do not really understand Jews, Judaism, or the Jewish project - least of all, it seems, the Church. But despite the disturbing prospects of what the religious future here may hold after the death of the present monarch (whose successor seems to be fascinated by the Islamic world), one silver lining remains – the existence of a strong and powerful State of Israel. Another is the advent of the Internet, enabling Jews all over the world to work together in dealing with the critical and complicated issues of our contemporary world - as our group has discovered to our amazement in the last two or three years.

Was Robert Wistrich asking too much when he urged me 20 years ago to take on this yoke of constantly challenging people who despise us and ultimately hope to cause our destruction? Have I wasted my time? Possibly. In theological terms, will Esau never cease from hating Yaakov?

But *Pirke Avot* does say it all: '*We may not be able to complete the task, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't give it a go.*'