

Jewish Women: Looking Backwards ... Looking Forward

Report of three meetings facilitated by the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

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The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities held meetings in Edinburgh, Dundee, and Lochgilphead during December 2008 to discuss *Jewish Women: Looking Backwards ... Looking Forward*. Together with Women in the Jewish Community, we also advertised a meeting in Glasgow but no-one other than three of the organisers attended despite the inducement of a free lunch; some of the comments below, however, reflect discussion with some members of Women in the Jewish Community in Glasgow.

Edinburgh

This meeting, held in association with the Edinburgh Literary Society, was attended by 32 people from Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation (EHC) (Orthodox), Edinburgh Liberal Jewish Community (ELJC), and the Jewish Network of Argyll and the Highlands (JNAH). (The last made a 230 mile round trip specially to participate in the discussion.)

Dundee

This meeting was attended by more than 20 people from Fife who are involved with Dundee Synagogue (DS).

Lochgilphead

This meeting was attended by 13 people from JNAH, mainly living in Argyll.

General comments

Participants at all three meetings agreed that the 1994 Review had not made any material difference to women in their community either in terms of activities or attitude. Members of EHC referred to the recent election of a woman as Chair of the Management Board but said that, whilst they did not believe that would have been possible 15 years ago, it was due to “changes in society” and not in any way the consequence of changes resulting from the Review.

Moreover, there was consensus that the Review recommendations were not relevant to small communities since these have other priorities; “We don’t have access to any of this – educators, schools, training – we have enough problem just bringing the regular members together.”

It was noted that women in Glasgow had been particularly engaged with the 1994 Review, holding a range of focus groups on different issues, and producing a substantial report and set of recommendations in relation to the Scottish community.

It was emphasised that disparate communities within single cities need to collaborate, meet and share facilities, and work together in various areas of communal life, even if they prefer to retain their distinctiveness.

At present there are barriers to collaboration, and there was a widespread feeling that *halachah* is often an excuse to conceal inertia on the part of the existing leadership. Some people felt that the current leadership is too weak to institute change, and it was suggested that “whilst the Chief Rabbi may reach out on an inter-faith level, he is reticent

to build bridges between Jewish communities. Small communities desperately need those bridges to be built.”

It was frequently commented that London-based bodies, such as the Chief Rabbi’s Office and the Board of Deputies, “don’t recognise that there’s Jewish life outside the M25, let alone as far away as Scotland”. This attitude was echoed more locally when some members of Glasgow community objected to discussion groups being arranged outwith Glasgow on the grounds that Glasgow is the only “real” Jewish community in Scotland.

Being small was not necessarily regarded as negative, and some people had actively chosen to leave larger communities to live in a more close-knit environment. It was also noted that individuals tend to be more valued in smaller than in larger communities because “if you don’t include everyone, you won’t be able to do anything.”

Education

- Small communities do not have the resources – or numbers of children – to support Jewish day schools, and, where a community is spread over a large geographic area, even the provision of regular Religion and/or Hebrew language classes is a challenge.
- It was generally believed that Jewish education for girls has not improved significantly in the last 15 years.
- It was commented that it is difficult, if not impossible to persuade many post-Bat and Bar Mitzvah teenagers to continue with Jewish education, because “education for the sake of it just isn’t going to work”.
- Concern was expressed that most teachers of Judaism or Hebrew language have no formal training, and doubts were voiced as to the level and accuracy of their knowledge, but there was an attitude of “beggars can’t be choosers” and an acknowledgment that small communities do not have the resources to provide appropriate training.
- It was suggested that Jewish education is more important in Scotland than in Israel because there “when it’s a Shabbat or Festival you can feel it in the air, even if you’re not observant. Here you have to work at it.” Several Israelis commented that they felt a much greater need to ensure their children received a good Jewish education now that they live in Scotland than they had when living in Israel.
- Many parents are investing a great deal of time and effort to ensure that their children receive a Jewish education. One JNAH family with a pre-school age child now makes a 50-mile round trip at least once a week to enable her to attend religion classes and take part in social activities.
- Several people from JNAH and DS commented that Lubavitch is “more accepting, letting you do your own thing” than Reform which is seen as ‘quite strict’.
- It was noted that the high level of intermarriage in all participating communities may sometimes mean that Jewish education at home is limited.

- However, it was widely felt that having “married out” should not disqualify charismatic and effective teachers from teaching Judaism or Hebrew classes.

Recommendations

- Communities should set up “family education” classes that involve both parents and children.
- Larger communities should provide support to smaller communities to train teachers, and to provide books and other resources for lessons.

Synagogue and Prayer

- It was felt that the community should be more welcoming towards all women, not only those who are single. However, it was noted that single women may often be “hidden” so that the community at large is not aware of any problem.
- Despite increased expectations, many women still feel that there are significant obstacles to participation in the synagogue. As a result many have stopped attending synagogue services except for important festivals and events.
- Opinions as to the value or otherwise of men and women sitting separately in the synagogue was not always divided along expected lines. Some members of the EHC disliked being “forced to sit behind the *mechitzah*”, and wished that men, women, and children could sit together as families. However, some members of ELJC commented that to do so can alienate women and men who have no family with whom to sit, and expressed the view that “men sitting with men, and women with women makes the community more inclusive”.
- People from DS felt that separate seating does not make sense when there are only very few people attending services, but noted that some visitors to the synagogue have been uncomfortable when they realise that men and women are sitting together, and that some left before the end of the service because of this.
- Small communities often have difficulty in gathering a *minyan* when someone needs to say *kaddish*. The feeling that “women don’t count” is exacerbated by desperate e-mails and phonecalls to “all” (i.e. male) members to make up a *minyan*.
- Differences between Orthodox, Reform, and Liberal practice were discussed. Members of ELJC, JNAH, and, to some extent, DS, tended to support, for example, the inclusion of women in a *minyan* either for ideological or pragmatic reasons (it was, for example, commented that “in a tiny community managing without some role reversal is impossible”), but the majority of members of EHC expressed support for “different but equal” roles for men and women.
- It was noted that “for a long period the only competent person [to lead a service in DS] was female” and that some people had regarded her involvement as “the thin end of the wedge. But it’s the thick end of the wedge, and we have to lever the door open.”

- Some people felt that Bat Mitzvah is more widely and publicly celebrated now than it was 15 years ago, but others disagreed. A recent double Bat Mitzvah celebration, the first at DS, was described as “fabulous”.
- However, one of the DS Bat Mitzvah girls was unimpressed with the role of women in Judaism, saying “I find Judaism really sexist – women get the unimportant things, and men get to pray.
- This was echoed by a young woman from JNAH who said “The Jewish world is not a place for the feminist. Unless women are perceived as being equal to men, and are allowed up on the *bimah* to read the Torah, the same as the men, they don’t have equality. People who participate in a religion should know the complete truth about it, and I don’t believe Jewish women do.”
- However, in EHC, post-Bat Mitzvah girls are now encouraged to give Torah synopses from the women’s section of the synagogue.
- The Sefer Torah is regularly carried along the front of the women’s section during Shabbat services at EHC, and women are encouraged to touch and kiss the scroll.
- In recent years women at EHC have danced with a Sefer Torah on Simchat Torah (separately from the men’s dancing).
- On one occasion last year a Shabbat service for and by women was held at EHC at which women *leined* from a Sefer Torah. However, this service was not permitted to take place in the synagogue itself, but was instead held in the adjacent sukkah.
 - EHC members believed that none of the above four activities had come about as a result of the 1994 Review, but that they were rather due to the active efforts of the current Rabbi to involve women in synagogue services without in any way departing from *halachah*. It was, however, noted that although the synagogue is affiliated to the United Synagogue, it has on occasion found it difficult to obtain guidance on these issues from that organisation.
- Some people felt that the above activities do not go far enough, and were unhappy that Orthodox synagogues do not provide equal opportunities for women to serve in spiritual life.
- It was noted that although the role of Synagogue President at EHC has been changed to “Chairperson of the Management Board” in order to permit a women to hold the post, it no longer includes any responsibility for religious, synagogal matters, or prayer. There was overwhelming support for the current “brilliant” female Chair, but some regret was expressed that the final word on all matters religious – including education – is perceived to be in the hands of men. Some people described this as “offensive”, particularly since all of the teachers in the community are women.
- It was questioned whether there is a genuine desire for change, and noted that the position of women is unlikely to improve if the community as a whole does not want change. It was, moreover noted, that improved education has led to higher

expectations, and that if these are frustrated then some women may feel increasingly alienated from the community.

Recommendations

- The role of women with regard to synagogue and prayer must receive urgent re-examination in order to discover ways of attracting women into synagogue life rather than the reverse.
- Men in the community must listen and respond positively to what women are saying.

Social Issues

- Communal events frequently reinforce divisions within the community. For example, table plans often group all singles together on one or two tables.
- People from DS emphasised the effectiveness of a small close-knit community in providing support to members who are ill or bereaved.
- It was noted that, following the 1994 Review, a support group for widowed women had been set up in the Glasgow community. This had been a valuable resource for several years, but was now largely inoperative.
- Intermarriage is an issue for all the participating communities. Comparisons were drawn between “marrying out” now and in the past when “the whole community sat *shivah* for you”. It was noted that there is inequity in the treatment of men and women who marry a non-Jewish partner. Despite the fact that a woman’s children are *halachically* Jewish regardless of whether or not the father is, it was felt that “women are punished more because they’re more emotionally vulnerable”, and that “women are more forgiving of their sons and more willing to pressure their daughters”.
- Several women married to non-Jewish men commented that they receive more support from their husbands “to be Jewish and to bring up the children Jewish” than do some of their friends whose Jewish husbands are uninterested in religious observance.
- Comparisons were drawn between social equality between women and men and lack of equality in religious matters.
- The point was repeatedly made that “it’s much more difficult to be Jewish when you live in a small centre.”
- Antisemitism was a major concern, particularly among people from DS and JNAH who live in rural areas where “it’s quite a dangerous thing to say that you’re Jewish, especially because of what’s happening in Israel”. People described being “intimidated” by, for example, a “virulently anti-Jewish Muslim student at my college who is very passionate and extreme in his views”. It was particularly commented that “it’s dangerous being a Jewish woman in the UK just now” and

most people from JNAH said that they would “think very carefully before deciding to tell someone I’m Jewish.”

- One mother of a 14-year old girl recounted how her daughter had recently been taunted at school that “you killed Jesus”, but said that she had not approached the staff to complain because she believed they would respond “well, you did.” “

Recommendations

- More effort must be made actively to involve single people – men and women – in communal activities in a way that makes them feel welcome.
- Planning for the UK community must take account not only of large Jewish centres, but of the particular needs of Jewish people living in isolated and rural areas.

Children

- There was overwhelming support for provision of childcare services within the Jewish community, including for special-needs children, but widespread concern that small communities simply do not have adequate resources – either human or financial – to provide any alternative to local authority nursery and out-of-school facilities.
- Jewish Care Scotland and Cosgrove Care, both Glasgow-based organisations, were very highly praised for their outreach services, and the commitment their workers have shown in supporting special-needs children in Edinburgh and elsewhere in Scotland.

Recommendations

- Where possible community facilities should be made available to enable working mothers and single parents to leave their children in a safe Jewish environment. Carers should not only be “Jewish Grannies”, but should include both men and women. It was suggested that this might provide a route by which people “on the fringe” may be attracted to become more involved with their local community.
- The importance of “Jewish Uncles” and “Zeides” as well as “Grannies” was stressed, particularly since approximately 60% of children attending local Religion classes do not have a Jewish father. Boys from these families do not have anyone to sit with in the synagogue to help them follow the service, nor to help with practicing the *leining* for their Bar Mitzvah *sedrah* and *haftarah*. It was, however, noted, that because of this, many of the mothers have learned the *trop* in order to help their sons – and that “once you know it yourself, you want to do it, and not just see your son doing it”. As a result many of these women have been in the forefront of organising a women’s service at EHC.

Get and Agunah

- Strong views were expressed about *Get* and *Agunah*. There was praise for the introduction of a clause in the Family Law (Scotland) Act which is intended to discourage parties to a civil divorce from refusing to co-operate in giving or receiving a *Get*, and also praise for the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities for its work in achieving this. It was recognised that the inclusion of this clause would in itself discourage non-cooperation, and that its success should not be measured solely by the number of times it is invoked in court. However, some people expressed regret that it had been necessary to invoke civil law because “a nation of lawgivers should not require the intervention of civil law to enable Jewish women to receive justice”. It was commented that *halachah* appears to be more immutable with regard to familial matters than in relation to other areas of economic and social life.
- It was noted that views expressed locally during the 1994 Review had led to the establishment of a Beth Din liaison team in Glasgow to support women throughout the process of obtaining a *Get*.
- It was strongly emphasised that there should be much more understanding and support in the community for women trapped in violent and abusive situations than there is at present.

Recommendations

- Ways of monitoring the success of the Family Law (Scotland) Act “*Get* clause” should be investigated in order to give women confidence that the new legal structures are “doing the job”.
- Communities should be fully engaged with anti-domestic abuse campaigns such as “Zero Tolerance”.
- Every community should appoint a person to give support and advice to individuals in violent and abusive situations, and also to inform and advise communities of the most appropriate ways of responding and providing support.

Note: The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland comprising Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Dundee as well as the more loosely linked groups of the Jewish Network of Argyll and the Highlands, and of students studying in Scottish Universities and Colleges. SCoJeC is Scottish Charity SC029438, and its aims are to advance public understanding about the Jewish religion, culture and community. It works with others to promote good relations and understanding among community groups and to promote equality, and represents the Jewish community in Scotland to government and other statutory and official bodies on matters affecting the Jewish community.