

Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

Annual Report 2004-2005

Since the last Annual General Meeting in Edinburgh in September 2004, I am happy to report that much has been achieved in the fulfilment of our aims, and especially the main one which is to provide the Jewish Community of Scotland with a single voice in dealings with the government and other statutory and official bodies.

The highlight of the year was the official visit of the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks to the Scottish Parliament on 14th September 2005, when accompanied by our Director, Ephraim Borowski and our Public Affairs Officer, Leah Granat he met the First Minister, members of the Scottish Executive, party leaders, MSPs, civil servants and Church leaders in private meetings. At lunchtime we hosted a Kosher sandwich lunch in Committee Room 2 during which the Chief Rabbi addressed our guests including representatives of other faiths and minority communities, trade unions, and others, and ably answered their queries and concerns. After lunch, he addressed the Scottish Parliament in the "Time for Reflection" slot which precedes the official business of the day.

The work involved in putting together such a programme when each meeting has a different agenda is massive and we are fortunate to have Ephraim and Leah with their vast knowledge of the Scottish political system and their acquaintance with the personalities involved to carry this out successfully. Of course we are eternally grateful to the Chief Rabbi for taking a day out of his busy schedule to help us in our work. He is a wonderful ambassador for the Jewish Community and is respected by all.

Family Law Bill

Top of the agenda in the past year has been to ensure that the Family Law Bill should include a provision so that in civil divorce proceedings, the Sheriff should be aware of the possibility that a "get" (religious divorce document) might not have been issued. This would have the effect of minimising the number of Agunot (chained women) who, despite being divorced in civil law, remain married in Jewish law because of the refusal of the husband to issue a get.

Despite previous assurances, when the Bill was introduced there was no mention of this provision; however we were assured that our concerns could be met by an amendment which of course would have to be acceptable to the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament. Our task was therefore to gather all party support for an amendment so that the issue remained outwith the sphere of party politics. The Council wrote to all MSPs drawing their attention to the issue and asking for their support. A staggering 46 MSPs responded positively, and this resulted in a Parliamentary Question, to which the Minister replied: "We remain in close contact with representatives of the Jewish community in Scotland and appreciate their concern to ensure appropriate granting of religious divorce by separating spouses, as required by Jewish law. We are continuing our discussions in the context of the bill and will welcome parliamentary debate and scrutiny." In addition, the First Minister, Jack McConnell wrote to Ephraim saying that he was "confident that we can continue to work together to ensure that the Bill meets the needs of the Jewish community".

We then had to devise our own amendment, and ensure that it would achieve its purpose in terms of Halachah, as well as being in proper legal form. This was then proposed by Ken Macintosh MSP at Stage 2 of the bill and was approved by six votes to one. It will now go before the entire Scottish Parliament for final approval and the Royal assent. One of the

features of the amendment which pleases us is the fact that it is drafted in general terms and that the word 'Jewish' does not appear and yet our concerns are adequately met. Ephraim and Leah have worked hard on this issue and we are hopeful of a positive result.

Shechitah

As we reported at the last AGM, the Council (SCoJeC) in conjunction with Shechita UK responded to the Draft Scottish Executive Response to the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) Report on the Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter. FAWC sought to ban Shechitah on the grounds that the animals which are not pre-stunned might suffer pain. Our response pointed out that they had produced no scientific data to back that up and that the Jewish method of slaughter caused an instant drop in blood pressure to the brain and therefore an instant loss of consciousness, thereby itself constituting stunning. We also pointed out that there was a high failure rate with stunning machines causing those animals far more distress. Ephraim and Leah met Hugh Henry, the Deputy Justice Minister in October 2004 and were assured that there is no threat to Shechitah in Scotland.

Petitions

At the last AGM the Director mentioned that a petition had been submitted to the Public Petitions Committee of the Scottish Parliament which suggested that the JNF should have its charitable status withdrawn. The petition was referred to the Communities Committee which unanimously decided that this was outwith its remit and closed the petition. We were happy to be of assistance to the JNF on this occasion.

Motions

Several pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel motions have been lodged by MSPs in the course of the last year, most recently congratulating the students of Edinburgh and Stirling Universities on twinning their student associations with Bir Zeit University. Whilst unpleasant this type of parliamentary motion does not have any impact on Scottish Parliament or Executive policy. It remains open for around 6 weeks during which time MSPs can sign to express their support and it is then consigned to the archive. The two recent motions have achieved very little support. It is generally counterproductive to mount an active opposition to such motions or to encourage MSPs to put forward amendments as this only gives the motion more publicity than it could otherwise achieve. We will continue to develop and maintain strong links with MSPs from all parties and to monitor all Scottish Parliament activity on a daily basis so as to be able to respond effectively whenever the need arises.

Interfaith

At the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in May 2005, whilst they roundly condemned anti-Semitism as "the oldest hatred" a motion was carried advocating disinvestment from the Church's funds in Israel and to "instruct the Church and Society Council to consider what measures may be taken so that the Church does not benefit those firms and organisations which support or profit from the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands" We are at present having talks with the Church on this and other relevant issues.

The Moderator recently visited Israel with a view to supporting the Palestinian cause. We arranged to see the Moderator both before and after his visit and were able to suggest

alterations to his itinerary to give him a fairer picture. I am grateful to Kenneth Collins and Henry Tankel who together with Ephraim and Leah met the Moderator.

On a very pleasant note, the Cardinal Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh Keith Patrick O'Brien recently hosted a reception at his home in Edinburgh to mark the 40th anniversary of "Nostra Aetate". Rabbi Moshe Rubin and the Cardinal planted a tree in the Cardinal's front garden to mark the occasion and the goodwill which exists between the Roman Catholic and Jewish Communities in Scotland. A tree will also be planted in Israel in the name of the Cardinal to mark the occasion.

Disclosure Scotland

SCoJeC has taken on the task of ensuring that all members of our Community over the age of 12 who have dealings with children in any capacity comply with the new legislation and I would urge anyone who is involved with children and has not had a Disclosure check to speak to Leah as soon as possible.

Four Corners

Our newsletter providing news and views of the various Jewish Communities in Scotland is now in its seventh edition and is very much welcomed especially by the smaller communities. It can be obtained on the web *at* <http://www.j-scot.org.uk> *or* from Leah. We are indebted to Jacqueline Speyer, a former leader of the Argyle Jewish Community who now lives in Jerusalem for arranging the layout and design of the newsletter. Despite losing her to Israel, the wonders of electronic mail have enabled her to continue her work for us with much help from Leah at this end.

Oban/Dundee

On Chol Hamoed Succot 2004 we held a succah party in Oban. Two members of the Jewish Network of Argyll and Highlands built the succah and the morning's rain lifted in time for an enjoyable and leisurely lunch in the succah followed by a discussion about Succot and explanation of the lulav and etrog which was led by two Israeli visitors.

On 11th September 2005 we held a social and educational event in the Dundee Synagogue when the guest speaker was Elkan Levy a former President of the United Synagogue in London who has taken on the role of Minister to the Small Communities from Rev Malcolm Weisman. It was well attended and we are grateful to the Dundee community for their hospitality and to Leah for making the arrangements.

For photographs of these events see issues 4 and 7 of Four Corners

Consultations

As you will read elsewhere, SCoJeC has responded to a large number of consultations in the past year. In order to make these responses truly representative of our Community, Leah and Ephraim have drawn upon the expertise of Rabbis, care workers and others with specialist knowledge such as Doctors and Teachers and we are grateful to them for their advice.

BEMIS

At the last AGM, Rami Ousta, Director of the Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure for Scotland (BEMIS) addressed the meeting and stressed the importance of the Jewish

Community's involvement with his organisation describing it as a two-way process in which both organisations would benefit. In the past year this has borne fruit and we have entered into a formal joint working agreement, under which Leah now produces a weekly digest called MEMO (Minority Ethnic Matters Overview) of matters affecting minority communities for them. SCoJeC benefits financially from this and we are grateful to Leah for undertaking this task on top of all her other duties on our behalf.

Thanks

The Scottish Council would not be able to do a fraction of its work without the dedicated and constant efforts of Ephraim and Leah. In addition, both of them contribute financially, Ephraim because he gives his services as Director voluntarily and Leah, through her work for BEMIS and because she works far more hours than we could afford to pay her. We are grateful to those who support us financially, especially the Glasgow Community and Bloch Trusts, the various Scottish Synagogues, the Board of Deputies and the Glasgow Jewish Representative Council. I have been greatly assisted by my predecessor Dr Kenneth Collins who as the President of Glasgow Jewish Representative Council is vice Chairman of SCoJeC. Thanks are due to the other Vice Chairman, Dr Philip Mason, President of the Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation as well as to Mr Daniel Clapham, the Hon Treasurer and Mr Stephen Kliner the Honorary Secretary. The community is indebted to these dedicated individuals who give freely of their time and experience.

John A. Cosgrove (Chair)