Nostra Aetate
“IN OUR TIME”

It is now 40 years since the Vatican issued the declaration ‘Nostra Aetate’ opening the way for dialogue between the Catholic and Jewish communities. At the suggestion of the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, Cardinal Keith O’Brien, Archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh, hosted a kosher reception to mark this significant occasion, which was attended by senior members of the Jewish and Catholic communities, representatives of other faith communities and the Scottish Executive.

Rabbi Rubin of Glasgow’s Giffnock Synagogue and Cardinal O’Brien planted a tree in the garden of the Cardinal’s official residence to symbolise the continuing growth of understanding and dialogue between the two faiths.

John Cosgrove, Chair of SCoJeC announced that the Scottish Council intends to plant trees in Israel in the Cardinal’s name to mark the anniversary. The Cardinal and Rabbi Rubin welcomed the rapprochement between Judaism and Catholicism that Nostra Aetate had made possible, and expressed pride in the shared moral values of both faiths. Rabbi Rubin described Nostra Aetate as a ‘brave document that had brought a welcome breath of fresh air to interfaith relations’, spoke warmly of the visit to Israel made by Pope John Paul II and said:

‘It is now time to go further, to take this respect and friendship we share to the streets. To the youth who perhaps are caught in a trap of hate towards society which manifests itself through crime. We need to talk louder than bombs and terrorism, and find ways together to combat the few who believe that they can conquer the world’s belief and mind through terror.’

Ephraim Borowski, Director of SCoJeC said ‘I am delighted at this very public recognition of the growing warmth between the faith communities of Scotland’.

Another Corner - in Outer Space

There are some situations you really could not make up. Imagine the intrepid traveller debarking (as they now say) from his flight to Heathrow. Looking over his shoulder to exchange a pleasantry with cabin staff, he collides with his most high-profile former student (who had better remain anonymous, but whose leadership of a political party was recently suspended in alcohol). At that instant my phone rings: the senior reporter of an allegedly quality Sunday paper wishes to know the Jewish view of extraterrestrials!

“No Comment,” will not suffice, so after several conversations with people who inexplicably could not answer for laughing, I am referred to the “world’s leading expert on Jewish extraterrestrials” (why just the world’s - why not the Universe’s?). We have a definitive ruling that ET cannot be included in a minyan for prayer. The Martian Beth Din may perhaps have come to a different conclusion but they were unavailable for comment.

FOR RESULTING ARTICLE, SEE: WWW.SUNDAYHERALD.COM/53020

Ephraim Borowski, Director of SCoJeC said ‘I am delighted at this very public recognition of the growing warmth between the faith communities of Scotland’.
My participation on the recent Scottish Schools trip to Auschwitz was a last minute opportunity, while visiting Scotland from Israel, so there was no time to ready myself with either background reading or emotional preparation.

Travelling through the white wintry Polish countryside, reflecting on the difference between my journey to Auschwitz from that of the innocent who were marched to their deaths, it was hard to know what I was beginning to feel; more than sadness and anger I felt a deeply painful wound of hundreds of years of persecution. Through expulsion and pogroms the Jews remained true to their beliefs, laws and customs, complete with daily prayers that include a vision for the future; the end to dispersion and anti-semitism.

Throughout the day our young Polish guide calmly portrayed the severity of what happened in her hometown of Oswiecm forty years before she was born. The freezing cold tore through our layers of warm clothing added to the disturbing nature of the day. Auschwitz appeared perversely handsome in the winter snow nonetheless the underlying feeling of death, hate and abuse would not leave me. We saw the legendary piles of shoes, glasses, bags, brushes, hair and empty Zyklon B cans at Auschwitz I. Horrific. On one cell wall, an inmate had used a fingernail to carve a portrait of Jesus on the cross. I stared at it unable to decide whether it was the victims’ reflection of self, or a call to G-d. Perhaps it was both. Another time in history I would not have got out of this death camp alive. The sensation of this understanding was overwhelming and I marveled at my very existence. Am Yisrael Chai! I wept to the sound of a deeply painful ‘Kel Male Rachamim’, warm tears running down my cold cheeks.

The methodical approach for maximising the efficiency of death is clear at first glance of Auschwitz II - Birkenau. All around me Scottish schoolchildren and teachers were astounded by the cruelty of the place. For me this was not new: as a Jew, the message of the Holocaust was ingrained as a child and forms a substantial part of who I am today.

Another significant message from my elders of the importance of our Jewish roots; I learnt the Aleph Bet before the ABC, a message I internalised and literally live out every day in Israel. All the signs in Auschwitz are in Polish, English and Hebrew. My heart jumped as I watched a Scottish girl carrying a box of Israeli memorial candles, with Hebrew print on the side.

According to Psalm 126 when we return to Zion “we will be like dreamers”, our long exile nothing but a nightmare. With the Holocaust and Israeli Independence fresh in our collective memory we are still waking up from the nightmare and defining our vision for our return to Israel. We will continue to wake up and eventually realise that Israel, our dream, will have truly become reality.
SCOTTISH SCHOOLS TRIP (continued from page 2)

Why did I do it? Why did I go to Auschwitz? I was just an ignorant member of the public, busy living my life in my own safe cocoon. I had seen pictures, watched the movies, heard constant reminders of the atrocities of the Holocaust, but it made no real impact on me.

Auschwitz-Birkenau was a killing centre. My emotions are hard to put into words. When we entered the camp, I felt physically nauseous, my stomach felt twisted. We were shown the gas chambers, in the main concentration camp. The hospital where medical experiments were carried out on children, women and infants. Human beings were put through gas chambers, frozen to death, tested with drugs and castrated.

I remember seeing the baby clothes of the little ones laid in a glass casket. We also saw the wall where thousands of people were executed by the SS soldiers. People had already laid flowers.

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I returned even more convinced how vile and depraved racism and nationalism can be. I recall coming across a reference to the Nazis running competitions encouraging German children to write in, one little girl wrote, “People are so bothered by the way we're treating the Jews. They can’t understand it, because they are God’s creatures. But cockroaches are also God’s creatures and we destroy them.” (The Toadstool - A Nazi children's book). It is this sort of material that creates racism and gives a political platform to racist parties such as the BNP.

We must all try to live together so humans cannot inflict pain on other humans, that history can never repeat itself. We must remember the holocaust and prevent ethnic cleansing at all costs. We must engage with our politicians so that we can prevent any unintentional racist legislation from being implemented. We are all responsible for humankind. We must protect the disadvantaged and stand up for those that are ill-treated. We must learn from the lessons of the past. The Nazis murdered 6 million people. Jewish, Christians, physically and mentally challenged, Gypsies, homosexuals, Soviet prisoners of war, Jehovah’s witness and those who did not agree politically.

I returned a different person. I was angry with the Germans and with the world for allowing this to happen but the day ended by Rabbi Marcus leading a prayer and saying “that we must not get angry”, that anger can lead to sinning itself – and that would make us no different from the perpetrators of genocide. We all lit candles for the deceased, laying them in the crisp snow.

To remember is not enough…

JOINING ABOUT 100 YOUNG PEOPLE and 50 adults, we left at around 7am on a damp Wednesday morning (Nov 23rd) from Glasgow Airport for a day visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau. An air of anticipation, trepidation surrounded us.

When we got to Auschwitz 1, we found a museum. We had such a short time to take so much in. It was very, very, very cold and reflected the chill I suspect that went through each person as we moved from block to block, each representing their own history of organised cruelty. The Nazis had made an industry of genocide and created economic gains from this - what kind of people exploits extermination for economic purposes?

Personally, I found Birkenau (Auschwitz 2) most shattering: the scale, the desolation, loneliness, the crudity of the situation. Overall, the shocking thing for me was that until the early 1990s, the Shoah and Final Solution was eclipsed from the histories of the concentration camps by other nationalistic memories such as that of murdered patriotic soldiers. Why was this?

Later, we visited Krakow and the only functioning synagogue left in the city, the Rama synagogue in the Kazimeirz (Kushmir) quarter. I learnt that before the Shoah, there were at least 60,000 Jews in Krakow (about 25% of the population) and after, only about 6,000. For me the total destruction of Jewish culture, life and heritage was distressing. There it dawned on me that this is what it was all about. Often people do not understand this, they remember the terror, horror and genocide but do not fully comprehend how the landscape changed with the Final Solution. To remember is not enough, we need to do something with that memory, and this is why trips like Wednesday are so important.

As educators, it is important for us to create opportunities for pupils to gain insight into the experience of being discriminated against, discriminating, witnessing discrimination and taking action against discrimination. We must not shy away from difficult topics and we need to present opportunities for pupils to practise standing up for themselves, each other and unknown others.
The “New year for Trees”, officially marks the beginning of the new ‘tax year’ under certain biblical regulations about agriculture. It is generally marked now as the beginning of spring, with tree-planting ceremonies, and a meal (“seder”) of fruit dishes. It is also an appropriate time to consider what Judaism has to say about the natural world.

Scriptural writings are full of natural imagery and are steeped in respect for nature, while biblical and later rabbinic law provide comprehensive legislation on issues such as conservation, animal welfare, species preservation, sanitation and pollution.

The Torah orders the creation of green belts around cities (Numbers 35:4.) Shabbat is a weekly rest for animals and the natural world as well as humans. We are called upon to offer thanks for all manner of natural phenomena (rainbow, lightning, shooting stars, the first blossoms of a tree, etc.). A most dramatic ecological gesture is Shemita, the seventh year rest for the environment, when all fields lie fallow.

There are dozens of exhortations in rabbinic writings to learn self-improvement from natural phenomena and non-human life. Hunting is seriously frowned upon in Judaism, and cruelty to animals is repeatedly prohibited in the Torah and the Talmud and later codes — and is one of the seven Noahide Laws incumbent on all humankind (as contrasted with the 613 commandments applicable to Jews themselves.)

Justice and fairness, especially towards those vulnerable, is a theme running through scripture. Every seven years all debt would be cancelled — an interesting model for the issue of Third World debt in our era.

The basics of environmentalism are Torah law. Psalms declares, “To the Lord belongs the Earth and all it contains.” Two thousand years ago the Talmud (particularly Baba Batra chap.2) extensively covers the regulation against atmospheric, water and even noise pollution, and arising from Deuteronomy (23:12) issues of waste disposal.

A moral consciousness based on Torah values would surely see merit in the argument for ethical investments, to ensure that monies are not invested in companies that use child labour, create environmental degradation or are socially irresponsible. After all, “Justice, justice you shall pursue” (Deut. 16:20).

In a raft of ‘Green’ issues Judaism has a balanced and reasoned approach that could be a source of pride to Jews and a source of inspiration to the non-Jewish world. More importantly, it could lead to positive action.

Judaism, with its rich heritage and history of respect for nature and non-human life, is in a perfect position to articulate a better-adjusted and more balanced environmental ethic. It would be in keeping with our tradition to do so. We would be tuning a blind eye to our own values if we choose to say ‘not my problem’.

How can loss of mental clarity through alcohol bring a person to spiritual clarity?

In the Megillah we see a miraculous 180-degree shift in fortune - the endangered Jews are suddenly safe. One who thought he lived alone in a hostile world suddenly discovers that God is really there, and laughs aloud in the joy of the unexpected.

Drink provides an opportunity to transcend our senses which blind us to seeing God behind all aspects of reality, manipulating events for our good. Even when things look bad and we’re suffering, in some way it has got to be all for the best, because there’s a beneficent God.

We are encouraged to “drink until you can’t tell the difference between ‘Blessed is Mordechai’ and ‘Cursed is Haman.’” It is only because of our limited perceptions that we see a difference between the two. In God’s infinite reality, all is ultimately for the good, and we can laugh with absolute trust in our future.
Dr. Philip Orkin

A few days before Rosh Hashanah a very old friend — in both senses of the word — died.

Phil Orkin, together with his wife Sarah, were the people who led to our first period of living in Scotland. As a student representative to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, and later and co-ordinator of the group) was a haven for me.

When we returned to live in Gairloch after Frank's retirement Phil asked a cousin of his in Argyll to get in touch with us. The introduction led us to the group that is now JNAH, and, through them we are now once again involved in the small Scottish Jewish communities.

When Martin Orkin wrote to tell us that Phil had died (at 96) we were sad to have lost both our old friends but we were grateful that we had known them and will always value the part they played in our lives, and especially for making a home in Scotland an important part of it.

VALERIE HOUSE

A Wild Succah

Looking at the pic of the JNAH succah in 2001 in 4C’s issue 4, you can just see a mass of green. It was willows, rhododendron and anything else that grew in my wild garden, which all needed cut back; an exercise in garden maintenance combined with creative construction. My knowledge of a traditional succah was very limited.

Now in the centre of Jerusalem, with my husband, this year’s succah would be different. Our yard already has four walls but Arnon ignored the obvious way to cover from wall to wall, fixed a single upright in the middle and struts in a star from it to the walls. At this stage it looked like a merry-go-round waiting to start. Then bulky date-palm branches with their sharp leaves following the star shape transformed it to a shelter, but inside it still looked like our yard — until out came Arnon’s grandmother’s old sheets, my collection of un-wearable scarves, paper-chains from children, special stones, shells and plastic flowers, a neice’s picture, two rather more traditional ones, greenery and dried grasses. The creative process was enhanced by the anticipation of welcoming a special guest first thing in the morning. Judith Lipman found her own way from the airport to our back door, thereby walking into our newly built (and again rather unorthodox) succah before the house.

The Argyl succah was wild in the natural sense — reflecting the principle of leaving the comfortable home to express trust in God’s protection (albeit theoretically, due to autumnal weather conditions.) The Nachlaot succah was ‘wild’ in atmosphere, befitting the joy and relief in God’s forgiveness after Yom Kippur. Whether our environmental wilderness is urban or rural, our spiritual wilderness is compensated by the sheer happiness of Succot.

SEE THE PESACH ISSUE OF FOUR CORNERS FOR MORE DETAILS

OR PHONE LEAH 07887 488 100
Divorce, along with bereavement, is said to be the most traumatic experience we can face. How much worse can it be to need two divorces? Because Jewish couples are ‘twice-married’ – by both Jewish and civil law – two separate divorces are needed if the marriage fails, to enable both partners to marry again. There can be problems if one of them – usually the husband – uses the religious divorce, (“get”) as a blackmailing tool against his wife (as in “I’ll only give you a get if you give up your right to any share in the marital home…”).

Some countries (including England) have addressed this problem by means of legislation, enabling a court to delay the granting of a civil divorce temporarily, until after the get has been completed. This has proved extremely successful, but hasn’t been the case in Scotland, where, even if they were aware of the problem – which they often weren’t – sheriffs have been powerless to act.

Since devolution this issue has periodically been discussed between SCoJeC and an extremely sympathetic Scottish Executive but there has never been any opportunity to legislate… until now.

The Family Law Bill, passed by the Scottish Parliament in December 2005, provided that opportunity, so in late 2004, discussions intensified. It was agreed that an amendment (which Ken Macintosh, MSP for East Renfrewshire, was happy to propose) would be introduced during stage 2 of the Bill when it is minutely scrutinised in Committee.

There followed a year of detailed discussions as to the precise wording of the amendment, which had to satisfy the strictures of the Scottish Parliament Standing Orders, the European Convention of Human Rights, and the requirements of Jewish law. The placing and possible (and possibly impossible) interpretation of every word was minutely examined by Scottish Executive lawyers and Orthodox and Reform Rabbis to ensure the amendment would achieve the desired result.

Parallel to this a major information campaign was launched by SCoJeC. Ephraim and Leah spoke to countless MSPs individually and in small groups to explain why the issue is so important to the Jewish community. The MSPs response was overwhelmingly supportive and the amendment was accepted by the Justice 1 Committee by a majority of 6:1.

With such a strong endorsement in Committee it seemed unlikely that there would be any threat to the amendment at Stage 3 – the final debate among all MSPs in the Chamber of the Parliament. But ‘unlikely’ doesn’t mean ‘impossible’ and at the very last moment one MSP decided to challenge the religious divorce clause and put forward an amendment to delete it altogether.

Following several days of intensive discussion and much holding of breath the Scottish Parliament debated the merits of including the religious divorce clause and put forward an amendment to delete it altogether.

Murray Tosh, Deputy Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, described SCoJeC as ‘a role model for other communities… Ephraim and Leah are very familiar figures around the Parliament and are very effective at putting your view. It’s thanks to them that there is now a provision for religious divorce included in the Family Law Bill.’