

Tammuz — Elul 5783



July — August 2023

## Etrog

The Newsletter of  
Sukkat Shalom  
Edinburgh

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# Word From The Sofa

## An even greener way of death?

*For dust you are, and to dust you shall return (Genesis 3:9)*

Sue Bard

Sukkat Shalom has signed up to the Eco-Synagogue Project that's encouraging UK Jewish communities to look at how environmental sustainability can be embedded in community life. At our AGM in March Sukkat Shalom member Jonathan Staal led a discussion about what we ourselves could do in this field in the coming year. There was further discussion at our Shavuot seder, marking both the Shavuot tradition of a night of study and the origin of this festival in the first harvests of the year. Both discussions were interesting, wide-ranging, and included some simple and achievable ideas and suggestions.



In the meantime, a question was raised about the Jewish way of death, and whether Progressive Judaism accommodates what are variously known as 'woodland', 'green' or 'natural' burials. As we're aware that such burials do take place in other Progressive communities, the answer's obviously yes. And when our Rabbi Mark Solomon was asked whether he would support and officiate at such, the answer was also yes.

Although the terms 'woodland', 'green' and 'natural' burials are often used interchangeably, they don't have exactly the same meanings. A 'natural burial' refers to the actual burial process — that is, the opening and closing of the grave, the preparation of the remains and the laying of those remains in the burial plot. In a 'natural burial' embalming fluid is not used and the body is placed directly into the earth, or in a biodegradable casket, or shroud, allowing the body to decompose naturally. Grave sites are dug by hand, without the use of heavy equipment. 'Green burial' includes this process, but also refers to the cemetery or site where the burial takes place. A 'green cemetery' uses no artificial pesticides or mechanised grave digging and all the bodies in it will have had a 'natural burial'. A 'woodland burial' usually refers to a natural burial in a particular type of green burial site — sometimes specifically named as a 'memorial wood'.

Traditional Jewish burials are already 'natural burials' with burial customs and rituals based on a belief that as we have come into the world naturally, our bodies (as the containers of our souls) should leave it naturally without either slowing or accelerating their decomposition. Embalming fluid is not used as it slows decomposition. This means that such burials don't add to the vast quantities of toxic embalming fluids that soak into the earth every year. Coffins are made of wood and are usually simple and bio-degradable, held together with wooden dowelling rather than metal nails. Caskets and grave liners are not hermetically sealed, so that decomposition is not compromised.

Progressive Judaism unlike traditional Judaism is accepting of cremation. But cremation burns huge amounts of fossil fuel, and pollutes the atmosphere. Maybe it's time for the cremationists to rethink... On another note, for many people of all strands of Judaism, the association of cremation with the Holocaust makes it abhorrent.

'Green cemeteries' and 'memorial woodlands' raise other questions for me. The logic of the disappearing carbon footprint means that these are not places where families, or the religious communities they were members of (if that was the case) or even the individuals themselves are memorialised. At the most, a tree may be planted and there may be a small plaque. But for the living, the material remains of the dead have been a vital source of knowledge of and connection to the past — in some cases, the only source.

In the recent documentary, 'Being Jewish in Scotland' Deborah Haase (of the Scottish Jewish Heritage Centre) muses as she visits her parents' graves at Glenduffhill Jewish Cemetery in Glasgow. *'I tend to come the day before Yom Kippur and pay my respects. Talk to them. Bring them up to date with the news. We joke about all the characters — there are so many people buried here. I have a vision of this underlife that's going on.'* I'm reminded of Olga Kodickova, one of the few survivors of those deported in June 1942 from Kolin in the Czech Republic. By May 1979, when Michael Heppner of The Ark Synagogue in London visited her in Kolin, she was the last Jew in town. She took Michael to the (now renovated) cemetery 'to see her friends', whose names were amongst the 480 inscribed on the memorial dedicated to the Jews of Kolin killed in the Holocaust.

I think too about the short history of Jews here in Edinburgh that can be traced through its dead. The plot that a wealthy Jew bought in 1794 (before there was a Jewish community as such), to build a mausoleum for himself and his family on Calton Hill and rediscovered just ten years ago; Braid Place Cemetery, in Sciennes House Place, the first dedicated Jewish cemetery in Scotland, consecrated in 1825 and closed to further burials in 1870; the Jewish section of the grandly titled Newington Necropolis that became known both as Newington Cemetery and as Echobank, used from 1870 until 1945 — the whole site now closed to new burials, but in its overgrown and neglected state maybe recreating itself as a green burial site.

Today, Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation's section of Piershill Cemetery and Sukkat Shalom's tree-shaded corner of the Victorian Dean Cemetery, whose first burial was a mere 15 years ago memorialise Edinburgh's two religious Jewish communities. Something for a buildingless community to ponder on.

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# Pride Shabbat Sermon

Rabbi Mark Solomon

It might seem a bit strange that with the overarching theme of Pride Shabbat, we began our service with a very heterosexual renewal of vows. But perhaps that's just the celebration of the wonderful diversity of Pride Shabbat that increasingly over the years has become an occasion, not just for LGBTQ people, but something in which everybody can share. And I hope that is the spirit of it this evening, that in celebrating Pride, it's not just about those of us who identify as LGBTQ, but about everybody who comes together to affirm the freedoms, the equality, the rights, the concept of a diverse society in which people can express not only different religions, different political affiliations, but equally with equal freedom, different gender identities, different sexual orientations, all together, sharing in the building of a free and open society.

But it's even more appropriate that we celebrated your marriage in the renewal of your marriage vows, Phyllis, and Len, because I and everyone that was involved at the time knows that in Manchester Liberal Jewish Community you have been open-hearted and vigorous champions of LGBTQ rights, so that from its very beginning the Manchester Liberal Jewish community had as an explicit aim, the inclusion of LGBTQ people who then did not always feel included or affirmed in the existing Manchester congregations. In its time, MLJC, Kehillat Hatsafon — the congregation of the north as it was called in Hebrew — was really a beacon for LGBTQ people in Manchester and the fact that this MLJC siddur that we're using tonight has within the very body of it, not only those meditations for Shema blessings, not only the Al Hanasim for Pride, but within the liturgy itself, we included little touches, as in the Hashkivenu, not 'when we go out and when we come in', but 'when we come out, and when we come in', so that it was very clear that the whole liturgy was there to affirm and embrace the great diversity of people, including LGBTQ people.

Pride can sometimes these days seem a bit superficial, very commercialised. very normalised, run of the mill, and perhaps unimportant in a society like ours, where we've won many of the key struggles for rights over the years, including that for equal marriage. And yet, of course there are many parts of the world where progress in LGBTQ rights is either non-existent, or is being challenged at every turn, or has even gone backwards in recent years. In Uganda, new and draconian anti LGBTQ laws have been legislated including life imprisonment for some supposed LGBTQ gay related offences. This is a shocking example of state sponsored homophobia. And what is even more shocking is that religious groups in Uganda, including church leaders, have not only accepted but embraced and celebrated this exercise of sheer and utter tyranny over LGBTQ people in Uganda. We have seen advances; Estonia just last week has brought in equal marriage. But in neighbouring Poland, the situation for LGBTQ people is truly worrying. And it's Polish government policy to attack and denigrate LGBTQ people at every turn as somehow supposed enemies of the state or the family. So that the position of LGBTQ people in Poland and in Hungary and in Putin's Russia as well as in other countries is very insecure indeed.

But also, in countries that traditionally pride themselves as being beacons of freedom and tolerance and diversity we know that all is not well. In the United States apart from the shocking regression in the rights of women generally, and women's reproductive rights there's also been, certainly in the Trump years sustained attack on LGBT people, and particularly on trans people. And we're seeing now in many parts of the States books that

refer to LGBT relationships, or identities may be removed from libraries, especially school libraries at parental request. This is creeping fascism in practice; we know that the banning of books leads to the burning of books and leads to the burning of people.

Even in our country, there has been an erosion in the public acceptance of LGBTQ people and their rights in recent years. Here in Scotland, as many of you can testify, through firsthand experience, the lives of trans people in particular have been constantly called into question, their identity denigrated and attacked. And whereas just under a decade ago the UK was at the top of of 49 European countries for acceptance and quality of life for LGBT people, it's now sunk to 17<sup>th</sup>.

So although we celebrate Pride we have to remember that Pride is not just a party and Pride marches, with all of the light-heartedness and sometimes the outrageousness that is part of the celebration of LGBTQ identities. It's still a protest march, as the very first Pride marches were, it's still a way of demanding that society should progress in openness and acceptance, and not use LGBTQ people as scapegoats for other perceived problems. We as Jews know, all too well, what it means to be treated as scapegoats, to be blamed for the ills of society. It's so easy to pick on minorities, especially visible minorities and project onto them, whatever we feel insecure about- the pace of change, or the state of the economy or whatever else it may be. And we as LGBTQ people, and Sukkot Shalom as a community, which has a wonderful record supporting LGBTQ rights here in Scotland, need to remain strong and vigilant.

And that's why I believe it's important for us to celebrate Pride Shabbat as explicitly as we are doing, not because LGBTQ people are more important than anybody else but because at this time of year, throughout the world, it's LGBTQ identities and rights and freedoms that we highlight in particular, and I'm proud and happy to be doing that this Shabbat. So Shabbat Shalom and Happy Pride to everyone.

*The day after Rabbi Mark gave this sermon, Sukkat Shalom joined thousands of others in the biggest ever Pride march and gathering in Edinburgh, walking from the Scottish Parliament along the Royal Mile to George Square. See our new banner!*



# Len and Phyllis Renew Their Wedding Vows

Celebrating 46 years of marriage, Len and Phyllis renewed their wedding vows with family members and Sukkat Shalom friends at our Erev Shabbat service on 27 May, which happened to be Pride Shabbat.



Phyllis was born and grew up in Glasgow in a traditional Orthodox Jewish family. Music has always been important — Phyllis sings and composes. We first benefited from her beautiful contributions to our services on Zoom during lockdown and now do so in person, in the sanctuary of St Mark's on Phyllis and Len's quite frequent visits from Manchester, where they live. Phyllis studied psychology at Strathclyde University and went on to have a career as a clinical psychologist.

Len grew up in Manchester, also in an Orthodox family. He lived in Israel for over eight years, mainly on a kibbutz, having various jobs including being a shepherd. He found his forte in catering, returning to the UK to complete catering management training. Len and Phyllis met in 1976 in Glasgow where he was working as catering manager for the Jewish Old Age Home as it was then known. They discovered Liberal Judaism when they were living in London and this is where they've found their spiritual home.

Later, living in Manchester, Len and Phyllis were early and formative members of Manchester Liberal Jewish Community, where they were, as Rabbi Mark said in his Pride Shabbat sermon 'open-hearted and vigorous champions of LGBTQ rights.'

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## Celebrations

Our Shavuot Seder on 25 May / 5 Sivan heralded a weekend of celebration and significance, with Jana and James Gibson's admission to Judaism at our Shabbat morning service on 27 May, participated in by cheder children and followed by a shared lunch and ceilidh.



On Sunday 28 May, Andrea Torres and Rolando Hernandez celebrated their wedding with the whole community, throwing what was deemed to be 'the best party ever'. Read below...

*Cheder Ceilidh*

# Jana and James Are Admitted to Judaism

## Jana's Admission to Judaism

*"I was sad that Sukkat Shalom had no synagogue. Then I realised that the synagogue is not important at all. The Torah is my synagogue. My home is my synagogue. The people in my community are my synagogue."*

On 27<sup>th</sup> May 2023 / 7<sup>th</sup> Sivan 5783 Jana and her son James were admitted to Judaism in a moving service conducted by Rabbi Mark. For Jana, it was both the culmination of a life-long quest and the beginning of a full Jewish life, with all the possibilities this holds for her and her family.



For as long as she can remember Jana has wanted to be Jewish. She says she has no rational explanation for a feeling that became a passion, stating simply 'whenever I came into contact with anything to do with Judaism I was really happy'. Growing up in Bratislava, her best friend was a Jewish girl whose grandmother had been stripped of any belief by her experiences in Auschwitz, and who was being brought up as a Catholic by her Jewish mother. Jana and her friend would go to an Orthodox synagogue where Jana says 'I was never turned away or made to feel unwelcome'. However, Jana believed that conversion wasn't possible as 'I wasn't born Jewish and would never be accepted as such.'

On leaving school, Jana trained as a nurse in Bratislava, working as staff nurse in the children's surgical ward at the Childrens University Hospital. In 2001 she left Slovakia for Scotland, where she met James, now her husband of 20 years, with whom she has four children, their daughters Melissa 16 and Corina 15, and their sons James, 12 and Edward, 5. They live in Sauchie, Clackmannanshire and Jana works, as she has done since she came to Scotland, at the Princess Royal Maternity Hospital in Glasgow. These days she works two night shifts a week in the Special Care Baby Unit.

Through all these years, Jana's feeling of connection with Judaism never left her, but she says 'for a long time I didn't have the strength to do anything.' But then she began tentatively to try and practise Judaism with her family, keeping Shabbat and some of the festivals. During lockdown, Jana joined the Matana Club, set up by several Jewish organisations to provide individuals and groups across Scotland with a monthly box of crafts, activities, recipes and other resources to help children celebrate forthcoming Jewish holidays (of which there's never a shortage). It was the leader of Matana who let Jana know that she wasn't the only aspiring Jew in her village. Through this person Jana learned about the possibility of conversion and the existence of a Jewish community with which she could convert — Sukkat Shalom. Jana reflects 'I'd been practising Judaism on my own, with no-one passing on their

skills and knowledge. I was still happy — it was the only thing I knew. I only realised what I was missing afterwards'.

Synagogues had always been important to Jana — she attended services in them wherever she found them and whenever she could. She says 'I was sad that Sukkat Shalom had no synagogue. Then I realised that the synagogue is not important at all. The Torah is my synagogue. My home is my synagogue. The people in my community are my synagogue.' The cheder — where she and her boys had the warmest of welcomes — is very important in this regard. Now, Jana is looking forward to extending her knowledge of Judaism, at the moment mainly through being alongside James as he prepares for his bar mitzvah later this year.

Jana has chosen the Hebrew name 'Hannah', said to mean 'God has favoured me' — a feeling that Jana has always had.

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## Mazal Tov to Hannah Holtschneider



We are delighted to let you know that, from the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, Hannah Holtschneider will become Professor of Contemporary Jewish Cultural History in the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh. Many of us attended her daughter Noa's Bat Mitzvah in January that was held in the Rainy Hall of the School of Divinity — another first. We send congratulations to Hannah and family, George, Noa and Yael.



# Andrea and Rolando's Wedding, and More

On Sunday 28 May Rolando and Andrea were married, surrounded by friends and family, including many members of Sukkat Shalom. Andrea's mother Gloria and some close friends had made the journey from the US, while many others were with us on Zoom. Rabbi Mark Solomon conducted the wedding and a wonderful summer buffet prepared by Rolando was followed by singing and dancing to Gica Loening and Phil Alexander's fiddle and accordion.



Andrea and Rolando grew up in Brownsville, Texas in Mexican families. They first met in Middle School, where they ignored each other. But it was a different story a decade on when they met again as graduates. By this time, Rolando was doing a PhD in Biomedical Informatics at Salt Lake City, Utah and Andrea was about to move from Brownsville to Washington DC for a job with the University of Texas System.

A long-distance relationship ensued, which became a continent-crossing one when Rolando moved to Edinburgh in January 2021 to take up a Research Fellowship at the University of Edinburgh's MRC Human Genetics Unit. There was also a pandemic going on and Rolando and Andrea were unable to see each other for the whole of that year. However, the virtual world was flourishing and Rolando and Andrea found ingenious ways to connect, including cooking together (Rolando choosing the recipe) and watching synchronized movies. In September 2022, they had a civil marriage in Utah and in December Andrea moved to Edinburgh, quickly finding a job that she enjoys based at the University of Edinburgh, co-ordinating PhD funded positions across 16 of Scotland's 19 universities with the Scottish Graduate School for Social Science.

Rolando describes both he and Andrea as having been exposed to 'some flavour of Christianity' in their upbringings. Religion wasn't something that was important to his family, or to him until he took a World History Class in High School and learned about Judaism. His intellectual interest became something stronger — 'I found myself wanting to live this life'. Rolando's first exploration of the possibility of conversion was with an Orthodox community whose rabbi agreed to convert him, adding 'as soon as you convert we're going to try and find you a wife.' Whereupon Rolando backed off. 'I was 19! Not ready to be married.' Eventually, Rolando joined an online Jewish education programme run by Rabbi Charni Selch affiliated with Conservative Judaism in Massachusetts who also carried out conversions, stipulating membership of a Jewish community, and attendance at her classes for at least a year. Rolando joined mixed Reform & Conservative congregations Temple Beth

El in Brownsville, Texas and Congregation Kol Ami in Salt Lake City, Utah, attended the online classes, and converted in 2016, aged 21.

Andrea, whose grandmother was a Mexican Catholic and whose mother went to church with evangelical Christians says 'I didn't really feel connected to religion growing up — I had so many questions that no-one wanted to answer.' Inevitably, she became interested in Judaism through Rolando. In Washington DC, she went to the Sixth & I Synagogue, a non-denominational, non-membership, non-traditional synagogue where she took a 'pre-course' to an actual conversion course. She then embarked on the year-long conversion course, reserving her decision about conversion until the end of it. Andrea relishes study and discussion and is looking forward to doing more of both. At the moment she's particularly enjoying the American Reform Judaism 'Women's Commentary on the Torah'.

For both Rolando and Andrea Judaism is about 'community'. Their outward-facing and celebratory approach to their religion and their community is finding expression in — among other things — their shabbat dinners. 'We used to have a tiny round table that could only seat four. Now we have a rectangular table that expands!'

## Kitchen Kehilla

### 'On Our Farm' with a chicken called Kneidel

*In the last Etrog, we introduced our Kitchen Kehilla, inviting readers to tell us about anything food-related that enthuses them. Here, **Lisa Barcan** tells us about a radio programme that caught her attention.*

I recommend a listen to this BBC Radio 4 programme in the weekly 'On Your Farm' series, introduced by Vanessa Feltz, as funny as ever. We meet inspirational Talia Chain, founder of Sadeh (Hebrew for 'field') a market garden and environmental community centre for young people based on Jewish values at Skeet Hill House, Orpington, Kent. The house and grounds were originally bought for the Brady Boys' Club by the Jewish Youth Fund during World War Two, as a space for young people to get out of London. Now the emphasis is on engagement with nature and growing food, and it's going strong.

The project engages volunteers and those on the Sadeh fellowship scheme with the land, growing vegetables and building a safe and inclusive community for people across the Jewish spectrum from ultra-Orthodox to Progressive. Kashrut is observed and Shabbat and the three 'pilgrim' festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Succoth festivals, are celebrated. The close of Shabbat is marked in the Havdalah Garden, replete with fragrant herbs. Reference is always made to Jewish teachings of land management with concerns for food justice (Sadeh donates produce to local food banks).



What an amazing Jewish initiative encouraging us to think of food and sustainability at the same time. And they have a resident chicken called Kneid!! To find out more, [listen to the programme](#), [visit the website](#), and if you're in the area, visit the place itself.

# What Our Members Say

Nick Silk

At the start of the year, we sent out a questionnaire to all members asking various questions about our community; a combination of questions asking what you would want of our community, what you think we should be doing, and how you are able to contribute. We have been in touch with most of you who responded to the questionnaire — it takes a while working through all the responses, so sorry to those of you who we haven't yet got back to — and we thought that it would be good to give you some feedback on the responses we received.



The headline comment is that 71 members answered the questionnaire. This represents about half of our membership (full and Associate Members) and we think that's a really impressive response rate. Thanks to all of you who completed the survey.

Below is a bit more detail on the responses to the questions and what we have done so far, but it is certainly worth saying that if you didn't respond to the questionnaire but would like to give us any responses to the questions (which are reproduced below) do get in touch with us via [contact@eljic.org](mailto:contact@eljic.org). We would also like to point out that, as one of the questions asks whether you would be able to accommodate out of town members when they visit Edinburgh for services, if you are an out of town member in this position, please do get in touch via [contact@eljic.org](mailto:contact@eljic.org) so that we can then get in touch with those who have offered accommodation. And lastly, we are aware that the nature of these questionnaires is that they are a one-off thing and so any new members will have missed the questionnaire. We will be sending the questions to new members, so that they too can volunteer and contribute to our community, but this will be done once every few months. So, if you have joined us recently, we will be in touch shortly!

Here are the questions we asked and what we've done so far:

**Are there any identities you hold that you'd like us to know about?**

We had 5 members feedback on ethnicity, 17 on LGBTQ+ identity and 7 mention health in their responses.

**Do you have hobbies and would like to know if other members share your interests?**

We had 29 members answer this question with a wide variety of hobbies mentioned — in fact the most any hobby was mentioned was 4 times! However there are a number of themes (e.g., art-related activities, sports) and we will be contacting the members concerned to confirm that they would like to be put in contact with others. While one of the options for maintaining contact could be WhatsApp groups, these groups will have to be set up as a group of friends rather than being overseen by Sukkat Shalom.

**Would you like to be put into contact with other members who live locally and would you be interested in attending or hosting shabbat dinners?**

We have had 15 generous members offering to host Friday night dinners for other members and 24 eager to join in as guests. Both prospective hosts and guests are spread across our membership from some more familiar faces to newer members. Also it was pleasing to see members from further afield than Edinburgh wanting to be involved so please let us know if/when you are coming to Edinburgh. We'll be sharing details to enable everyone who has signed up to get in contact with each other. Another 14 indicated that they were not sure so we are hoping once these get together become a more regular feature that some of the "not sures" will want to get involved.

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**Would you like to be put in contact with other members who live locally to you?**



**Would you be interested in signing up for classes or study groups run by Rabbi Mark?**

Over 40 people said yes! Some already attend Mark's classes/groups, some said they would like to but have restrictions on their ability to do so, and others asked for more information, which of course was provided.

### **Would you be interested in leading services?**

We had 5 members who weren't previously involved in leading services who said they would be interested in helping. These members are now incorporated into our distribution list which we use when asking for people to help lead services, and we're sure that we'll see more and

If so do, you have a preference for in-person or online?



more members help with leading services, be that in-person or on-line.

### **Would you be interested in helping set up for services and kiddush / for welcoming people?**

Well over 20 people volunteered for both helping set up and for welcoming people, with the majority of people (24) volunteering to do both. So, we now have a list of people who have volunteered to help and we have started emailing everyone on the list a month or two before in-person services asking for help with setting up and welcoming people.

### **If you live in Edinburgh, would you be able to host members overnight from further afield?**

15 people have said yes to this. We will contact them as and when we get requests for accommodation.

### **Do you have IT skills you could use to help with our weekly reminder and social media?**

We've had 3 people volunteer to help with our social media activities and this group has now started at looking at how we can improve our social media presence. We have some people who have offered to help with web design, and we hope to start looking at creating a new website soon. Unfortunately, no-one has volunteered to help with the reminders.

### **Do you have any other capacities you can help with?**

We have a number of people who have suggested ideas they could help with. We have still to get back to these people — we've been dealing with the other questions! — but rest assured we will be back in touch to discuss your offers of help.

### **Do you have any other suggestions for our community?**

As with the above question, we have still to get back in touch with people who answered this question, albeit the majority of answers actually reinforced answers to other questions in the questionnaire.

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# Reflections on the LJ Biennial

**Andrea Torres, Maurice Naftalin, Nick Silk and Sue Bard went to the Biennial. Here's what they had to say.**

## Andrea

Attending my first Liberal Judaism Biennial was a truly remarkable opportunity. Personally, I felt moved by the diversity and welcoming community that LJ fosters through the different sessions. Additionally to attending the regular program, I was also part of the Emerging Leaders Track where I learned about resources available to LJ's communities and got to connect with other leaders from across LJ communities. This track was meaningful to me as it furthered my knowledge and network so I can best help Sukkat Shalom in its community growth/outreach. As someone that previously had felt a bit out of place in other Jewish spaces (in the States), this conference gave me a new meaning for community and I felt thankful to have been so welcomed as a young Jew looking to share my ideas to our growing movement.

Additionally, I don't know if I had shared this yet, but [here is the video interview](#) they did with myself and other Emerging Leaders.

## Maurice

Was it worth it? Could anything be worth it, when "it" is getting up at 3:30am? The stakes were high for the Biennial, as far as I was concerned! And the answer? Yes, on the whole it was. Like any such event, there will be parts to remember, and parts that are better forgotten. I was rather surprised that the keynotes that I saw (I wasn't there for the whole event) mostly fell into the second category, while the individual sessions were always interesting, at least in hearing the views of other ordinary LJ members. Amongst the individual sessions, I enjoyed the one led by Danny Rich (in a very welcome return!) on the communal prayer that we say each Shabbat for the wisdom of the national government, and the one led by Lea Mühlstein on social justice in Israel.

But the standout session for me this year was Deborah Kahn Harris (the principal of Leo Beck College) reimagining the Book of Ruth. A close reading of the text reveals the possibility of polyamorous relationships between Ruth, Oprah and Naomi, and between Ruth, Boaz and Naomi, that are quite different from the conventional interpretation. It was really a pleasure to see this ambiguous and cryptic text held up to the light and viewed from different angles, allowing modern insights about relationships into an ancient story. Her forthcoming book about the Book should be well worth reading!

And my eccentric travel arrangements? The Biennial wasn't easy to reach, so if you came from Edinburgh you either gave it three whole days, including travel—or, like me, you got up at three in the morning and paid a fortune in taxi fares to reach it. It's really an important event for Liberal Judaism, and clearly huge effort went into ensuring that it would be rewarding for everyone who came. So making it rather easier for people to reach would be only to do it justice. Next year not in Daventry, maybe?

## Nick

This was my second Biennial and I was looking forward to it much more than my first one. The first one I went to was when I was Chair and part of the reason I went was because I felt I had to. This time I actually wanted to go. I had thought beforehand that I would know more

people and that indeed turned out to be the case, albeit that many of the people I knew were by Zoom. But for sure, I did feel part of the Liberal Judaism family. I don't think that there was any one bit that I enjoyed more than any other. The services were all good, the food and general socializing was similarly good, while the sessions I attended were probably what I expected — some weren't what I thought they would be, some I enjoyed more than others, but at none of them did I think "I wish I hadn't come to this one". So, while it wasn't a cheap weekend, and it wasn't the easiest place to get to, I would recommend that if you are thinking of attending a Liberal Judaism biennial, that you do so.

## **Sue**

I appreciated the generosity of Liberal Judaism's Emerging Leaders' Programme, was pleased Andrea was on it and got a sense of the excitement of that group. It felt both surreal and wonderful to be meeting members from our sister Leicester community in real life and to start to hatch plans for a weekend visit from them. As at previous Biennials, I enjoyed the renewed sense of being part of a vibrant movement with multiple and very diverse communities. I loved meeting the student rabbis and would have liked more than one of the these breakfast-time 'discuss with the rabbis' sessions. I liked the explicitly religious content — the beautifully co-led and music-rich Kabbalat Shabbat Service and Shabbat Morning Service and the enchanted outdoor Havdalah service led by LJY Netzer.

I was disappointed with the keynotes and as at past Biennials, I was disappointed with the limited opportunity to discuss Israel Palestine — a lack that seemed especially sharp this

year. I found Rabbi Igor Zinkov's honest discussion on 'Dilemmas and Challenges in Supporting Ukrainian Refugees' (co-chair of the Ukraine Crisis Fund, established one week before the invasion of Ukraine) interesting and thought provoking.

While Daventry was time-consuming and expensive for us to get to, it was a great venue in every way once we were there, with beautiful grounds too.

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# **Kol Nidrei Appeal 5784/2023-2024**

## **A call for suggestions!**

Our Kol Nidrei Appeal is one of the ways in which we try to recognise our various responsibilities for Tikkun Olam — that is, for the wider world. Each year we choose to support a range of charities that between them represent local, international, Jewish and non-Jewish causes, balancing charitable giving between Jewish and general charities. We always try to support smaller charities with low administration costs where a relatively small amount of money can make a big difference. Every penny contributed goes to our designated charities.

Last year, all of our selected charities were ones that members of our community had personally recommended and we'd like to be able to do that again this year. During the course of this year, those who recommended the selected charities have reported back on 'their' charities: Empty Kitchens Full Hearts, Jewish Care Scotland and The Lemon Tree Trust. For a report on the final charity, Bereaved Families Forum, see below.

For the coming year we'd very much like to be able again to select personally recommended charities.

If you'd like to recommend a charity let us know by emailing [contact@elijc.org](mailto:contact@elijc.org). Tell us the name of the charity, a bit about it and why you're recommending it.

Last year, Sukkat Shalom chose the Bereaved Families Forum (BFF) as one of its four Kol Nidrei Appeal charities. Sue Bard, who recommended it, reports back on how it's been doing.

The Bereaved Families Forum (also known as the Parents Circle Families) is a joint Israeli-Palestinian organisation of over 600 families, all of whom have lost a family member to the ongoing conflict. Managed by a joint Israeli-Palestinian board and staff team, it believes that the process of reconciliation between nations is a prerequisite to achieving a sustainable peace and it spreads these ideas through education, public meetings and the media. In collaboration with Combatants for Peace, it has for the last 18 years (other than during the pandemic) held joint Israeli-Palestinian Memorial Day events in HaYarkon Park, Tel Aviv on the eve of Memorial Day in, attracting many people seeking mutual hope and comfort.

This year has been even tougher for BFF than usual, with the election in November resulting in a coalition government of Likud, two ultra-Orthodox parties and three far-right religious factions. The activities of the BFF have been attacked on three fronts by this nefarious government.

There has been pressure to prevent the BFF from speaking to schools and youth groups, with such pressure heightened by a new condition that the Education Ministry has added for organisations tendering to deliver educational programmes. This requires that such organisations undertake 'not to degrade and humiliate the IDF' (Israel Defense Forces) and is seen as specifically targeting the BFF.

The annual joint memorial event was threatened by the Defense Minister's decision to bar Palestinian families entering from the West Bank on the grounds of 'complex security issues'. The BFF and Combatants for Peace successfully petitioned the High Court of Justice against the decision. It was heartening that 15,000 people attended this 'alternative' memorial event. Not that it was easy for them — as was described: *HaYarkon Park is largely devoid of lighting, it was hard to find the right path. There were no signs to show the way, so -symbolically- people arrived at the ceremony in darkness and uncertainty. But they kept going, hoping they would eventually arrive at the right place, the one full of light. There could be no journey more suitable to the current moment.*

Finally, a bill drafted by Likud was due to go before the Knesset to effectively stop donations from foreign governments to nonprofit groups. This bill would not have affected right wing groups that rely mostly on donations from private individuals, unlike human rights groups, which, because of lack of support from within Israel rely on donations from foreign governments. Objections from a number of foreign governments and the EU and the UN caused the bill to be (temporarily) withdrawn.

While any successful push back to the current Israeli government is heartening, its general chilling effect is to be feared, to say nothing of the resources and energy needed elsewhere that are consumed in resistance.



# The Netanyahus — A Book Review

Joshua Cohen: *The Netanyahus — An account of a minor and ultimately even negligible episode in the history of a very famous family*, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2022

*Joshua Cohen, author of The Netanyahus*

Reviewed by Elaine Samuel

Joshua Cohen is a writer who, for his fluency, irony, originality, craftsmanship, outrageousness, intelligence, erudition and chutzpah deserves to be better known in the UK. Called 'a major writer' by *The New York Times* and 'perhaps America's greatest living writer' by *The Washington Post*, he seems not to court publicity and prefers to do everything 'his way'. Indeed, a search on Wikipedia revealed not much more than that he was born in Atlantic City in 1980, that he attended Manhattan School of Music to study composition, and that he left without an MFA — a degree for which "he has expressed disdain". I suspect that Cohen himself has edited out much of his Wiki entry.



So it would not be in keeping with the spirit of Joshua Cohen to commend his latest novel on the grounds that it was selected by *The New York Times* as its Most Notable Book of 2021 or that it won the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. But you might just like to know that anyway! I must admit that I was not immediately attracted by its title...there is a whiff of tweeness about it, much in the style of Jonathan Safran Foer, which did not appeal to me. Then a good friend of mine (and member of Sukkat Shalom) gave it to me, said I would like it and who am I to take issue with her judgment?

The first question you may be asking, (either because there is no way you are going to read a historical work on the Netanyahus or because after the Netanyahus, as far as you are concerned, there should be no fiction) is the following: Is this a history or is it fiction? Do not fear...it is neither! I would call it a romp through Jewish history, though it's perhaps safer to say that it defies categorisation. The incident on which the novel purports to be based was told to Cohen by Harold Bloom, the acclaimed Yale literary critic with whom, despite an age gap of 50 years, Cohen enjoyed a relationship partly, if not wholly, based on their mutual love of gossip: Saul Bellow? With respect to bow ties, "he had a kleptomaniac's streak". Jacques Derrida? "Went skinny dipping with him. Good body, very fit". Bernard Malamud? "When it came to poker, he'd clean me out". The incident that Harold Bloom relates that forms the basis of Cohen's novel is set in the late 1950s, in Corbyn College, Upstate New York. Since Corbyn College is in Ithaca, it's not too heavy a disguise for Cornell University, the 'ivy league' college at which Harold Bloom studied and later taught, and about which Bloom regaled Cohen with stories of the antisemitism he experienced there — in particular how, as the only Jewish member of Faculty with tenure, he was asked to host a candidate for an academic post in the history department, a certain Dr. Benzion Netanyahu...the God-given son-of-Zion.

And so the narrator of this novel and host to Benzion Netanyahu becomes Dr. Ruben Blum, a Jewish historian but not, so he insists, a historian of Jews. Benzion Netanyahu on the other hand, is very much a historian of Jews, specialising in the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula and holding dear to his heart an idiosyncratic historical analysis which, in summary, is that *Everything you thought you ever knew about the Inquisition is wrong*. The true purpose of the Inquisition was not to convert the Jews or to ensure that converted Jews remained faithful Catholics, but rather to invalidate conversions and turn as many New Christians back into Jews as possible. Why? Were they bad Catholics? Or were they too good at being Catholics? No..none of these. It was because towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Catholics still needed a people to hate so the Jews had to "remain a people doomed to suffer". And this fitted perfectly into Netanyahu's world view: "Dr. Netanyahu was a believer and if there was any distinction between what he believed and what the rabbis did it was that Dr. Netanyahu preferred to attribute the power of change not to a deity acting in accord with an inscrutable design, but the world's vast stock of gentiles who acted out of hatred, constantly judging the Jews and oppressing them...converting them and unconverted them, massacring them and expelling them". I quote at length for obvious reasons....resonating, as it does with the world view of a latter day Netanyahu.

But why is this novel which documents Benzion Netanyahu's candidacy titled *The Netanyahus*? Because without invitation and with no prior announcement, Benzion arrives at Professor Blum's house with his wife and three raucous children in tow — the middle one now known as Bibi and the older one as Yoni who some 16 years later was to become the hero of the rescue from Entebbe and the only casualty of the Israeli forces. This, so Cohen remarks, "was crucial to the establishment of his brothers' careers and the family political mythology", a mythology very much fostered by the family itself.

*The Netanyahus* is blessed with very funny observations on American Jewish domestic life at the end of the 1950s, remarkable for an author now in his early 40s. We witness the incessant discussions of parents and in-laws about the very best ways to reach Ithaca from New York, the Thanksgiving table of the next generation ('instant' yam and marshmallow casserole, 'instant' cranberry souffle, 'instant' stuffing) all alien to Blum's mother and father, a cutter, who took over carving the turkey. "To him cutting was cutting, whether cloth or a bird". But essentially, *The Netanyahus* is a campus novel. If you like them satirical, (think Amis, Bradbury and Lodge), then you will love this novel. The two letters of recommendation that are sent by colleagues from other institutions (which comprise a large section of this book) are classic exercises in how to ship off an irritating colleague to another institution. If you prefer them with murders (think Dorothy Sayers), you may be disappointed though the ribaldry might not go amiss. The chapter in which the Netanyahu boys go on the rampage when the grown-ups are out had me howling on the floor. If you go for campus novels with some treatment of serious issues (think CP Snow), then this one would satisfy you. But if you like campus novels which also abound in serious discussions around Arabs and Jews, Zionism and Revisionism, Herzl and Jabotinsky, then don't think twice - order a copy or find it in the City of Edinburgh Libraries.

# Community Care and Support

In these difficult times, we are here for each other, so don't hesitate to ask for any help and support you may need, including simply the need to talk.

**OUR CARE TEAM** can be contacted at [care@eljic.org](mailto:care@eljic.org) and one of the small group of people who respond to emails will get back to you quickly.

**OUR EXISTING CONFIDENTIAL CONTACT SYSTEM:** Phone [0131 777 8024](tel:01317778024) or email [contact@eljic.org](mailto:contact@eljic.org) and one of the small group of people who respond to calls and emails will get back to you quickly.

**RABBI MARK SOLOMON** would like you to know that he's available on [07766 141315](tel:07766141315) and by e-mail at [marksolomon@outlook.com](mailto:marksolomon@outlook.com) if you'd like to talk to him.

**OUR WHATSAPP GROUP** allows people to be in direct contact with each other very quickly where help is needed. If you're not already on it and would like to be, email your mobile number to [waadmins@eljic.org](mailto:waadmins@eljic.org) and ask to be part of the group. You must be a member or associate member of Sukkat Shalom to join.

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You are a member or asked to get our emails

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