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ALONIM

עלונים

Winter Issue

Magazine of the Bristol & West
Progressive Jewish Congregation



 **ALONIM** Contributions & Editorial Policy.

The editorial policy is to encourage contributions from all Synagogue members and  **ALONIM** readers, concerning any aspects of communal and Jewish life, including cultural and communal reviews, information concerning synagogue activities, letters and feedback, and articles of Jewish cultural and religious interest. Typically, contributions of approximately **350 words** are preferred,.

The editor will NOT print anonymous or unattributed articles. Contributors are asked to be aware of the need to protect the copyright of others. Opinions expressed in  **ALONIM** do not necessarily reflect those of the synagogue Council or the Editors.

Contributions and communications can be sent directly to the **Editor**. For postal contributions please contact the editor. Copy date deadline for submissions is notified below. Submissions after this date cannot be guaranteed to appear in the next issue. If you are intending to send in unsolicited material please let the editor know ahead of the deadline.

 ALONIM copy date deadline	
Issue	Date
Spring	28th February 2017

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Front cover photograph:

Farmland near the old coal canal just outside Paulton, Somerset - about 15 miles from Bristol.

Photographer: Jack Wolf

Editorial

Sheila Brill



I had two empty pages (22 & 23) to fill in this issue so I decided to open my box of past issues of Alonim to find some inspiration. I found plenty of great articles but I decided that photos would be more fun. I hope you enjoy them!

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this year's magazine. I am a very grateful editor.

Membership news

Sheila Wilson
Membership Secretary



To everything there is a season, the circle of life, what goes around comes around, new beginnings - all sayings that are rattling in my head as I write this. Within the last few months many of our members and their families have experienced the full gamut of what life offers us and takes away from us. To those that have suffered loss, we grieve with them, to those who welcome new life, we share in their joy and to those who have just joined our

congregation or have moved on to new pastures we wish them all the best that life has to offer. Our sincere condolences to Judith Stavrakakis on the death of her dear husband Nikos. We also wish long life to Ellen Sims on the death of her father Henry Render. Many of you might remember Melly Facey who died recently. Melly was a long standing member of our community who contributed so much to us all. She will be missed.

Mazeltov to Iva and Leslie Stather on the birth of their grandson Matthew, brother to Isabelle. An even bigger mazeltov to Iva and Leslie on celebrating their 39th wedding anniversary.

A huge warm welcome to our new members, Kurt Lampe, Jennie Warner, Rose Burns and Hati South.

Wishing all the best to Effie and Michael Romain who have recently moved to London. They both played such a big part in our community for so many years and for all that they did, we are all sincerely grateful. They remain members and I hope to see them often when they hear the call to "go west."

When you're in a hole, do you keep digging?



Jane Clark,
Chair of Council

This thought has been uppermost in my mind for a good few weeks now whether I liked it or not. This is because the final big project to get my new home in Risca the way I want it has been to buy a used astronomical observatory building from a member of Bristol Astronomical Society who has reached the point where age and infirmity prevent him from using it.

I still had to build a foundation. Unfortunately the astronomy society spent all summer (the ideal building season) deciding that they would decline the kind offer of a donation of this building.

I was, therefore reduced to doing the work in the autumn, with ever-shortening days and the threat of bad weather. I was in fact luckier than I deserved to be: we have had an unusually dry autumn.

Mostly this project involves digging. First digging an octagonal foundation, a



foot deep and a foot wide, in an irregularly sloping garden, whose average slope is about one in four then figuring out how to pour concrete into a sloping trench and keep it there. I also had to dig out two old tree stumps which were in the way. The slope is the price I pay for my fabulous grandstand view across the Ebbw Valley.



Then, inside this, I had to dig and fill with concrete a separate cubic yard foundation to keep the

telescope ultra-still. High magnification means that vibrations also get highly magnified and ruin your photographs. I began to dig this hole completely at risk. I had no idea what I would find down there: rocks, tree roots etc. The neighbours had not dug anything that deep, so they didn't know either.

This is a bit like chairing a synagogue. You don't really know if you can do a good job,

but try anyway. You have to have a go at all sorts of things you've never done before.

A recent example of this was that I was asked to address a local branch of an organisation called Kairos, a Christian group whose aim is support for Palestinians. The website is very one-sided and contains material about Israel which is frankly fast and loose with the truth. I expected a frosty reception. I was warned by someone who had been to one of their meetings that there is an ugly undertone of anti-Semitism about this group. However, I knew I could not duck this challenge. So off I went, determined to present the best face I could as a representative of our little community. I was given ten minutes to address the group, then spent about an hour answering their questions. In my ten minutes I explained that Judaism is as much about a people as about a religion, and that this differs from Christianity. I also explained why Jews care so much about Israel, pointing out that many of us, including me, have close family there. I finished by telling them that although when Israel's very existence was threatened, Jews kept their criticism of Israel to

ourselves, now that, barring an Iranian nuclear bomb, Israel is the most secure country in the Middle East, we now feel freer to be critical, particularly of the failure to settle with the Palestinians. Therefore, I said, we want the same thing as them: peace with the Palestinians. Thus there was no need for hostility between us; and I suggested that they would do well to make friends with us and seek common ground. Their questions were challenging, and occasionally implied that Jews have no right to be in the Middle East, or that Israel was a uniquely wicked country. I think I put up a reasonable defence without being aggressive. Overall, however, I have had a rougher ride during some engineering design reviews at work. I agreed to propose to Council that we invite this group to Bannerman Road.

Over the next few weeks, we have Chanukah to look forward to. We're holding a party at the shul on Friday 30th December. Come along, sing the songs and forget it's winter. Next we have our AGM at 3:00 on Sunday 29th January, followed by Tu B'Shevat on the Shabbat of 10th and 11th February. I hope to see you at both.

Dancing to the beat of a Jewish heart



Rabbi Monique Mayer

5777 Sermon for Yom Kippur Morning

When I was in Religion School in the States, we started off each class with a roll call. As our names were said, we would respond “Ani po”, meaning “I’m here”. Mickey? “Ani po”. Shelly? “Ani po” Monique? “Ani po”. (And of course there were always a few characters that responded “Lo po” – I’m not here.) Really, the only information “Ani po” gave our cheder teacher was that we were physically present in the room. Our minds may have been a thousand miles away, but in hearing our names, we responded, “Ani po”, and then returned to our reverie.

There is another way to say “here” in Hebrew: Hineini. Hineini appears at least 8 times in the Torah. The first time it appears in the Akeidah, the traditional Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah morning. God tests Abraham by

telling him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Before God even tells Abraham what he is meant to do, Abraham responds without hesitation, “Hineini” (Gen 22.1). “Here I am”. Later in the story, as Abraham and Isaac journey up the mountain, Isaac notices that there is no sheep for the sacrificial offering and, turning to his father, says, “Avi”, dad, to which Abraham answers, “Hineini, bni” – Here I am, my son. The third time Hineini appears in the story is when Abraham is about to slaughter Isaac with a knife, and an angel of God calls out, “Avraham, Avraham”; Abraham stops himself and answers “Hineini”.

Hineini indicates critical moments in the Biblical narrative. When Isaac is old and calls his son Esau to his side, Esau responds “Hineini” (Gen 27.1), and we know something important is about to happen. Indeed, while Esau is sent off to prepare Isaac’s favourite meal, Jacob approaches his father, Isaac, disguised as Esau and calls out “Avi”. His father responds “Hineini, b’ni”, and Jacob subsequently steals Esau’s birthright. When Jacob tells Joseph to go check on his brothers and Joseph replies, “Hineini” (Gen 37.13), it is a foreshadowing of what is to come: Joseph is sold by

his brothers into slavery, setting subsequent events in motion. Finally, in the Exodus story, God makes first contact with Moses, calling out from the burning bush, “Moses, Moses”, to which Moses answers, “Hineini”.

In each place where the word Hineini appears, it indicates an answer to a call—a readiness to do what needs to be done. In that moment of Hineini, nothing else matters but the present task. What would it mean today to live those words and be fully present, to be able to respond, not with “ani po” — yeah, I’m here — but with hineini, here I am.

This question comes up a lot for me, with mounting distractions of an endless stream of email and a pinging smartphone. My greatest challenge is filtering out the interruptions when I need to plan and write. My piles of books and the internet are so much more enticing than battling with the words I struggle to get onto the page. I show up for the work, yet often it’s more “Ani Po” than “hineini”.

But, when I pay someone a visit, I turn my phone to “do not disturb”. It’s a rule I have, so that my attention is with the person

in the room, and not on my to-do list or someone else who might be trying to reach me. I’ve taken this approach since a mentor suggested that everything I do should have a goal or intention. This idea intrigued me. How could I have a goal for a visit? I don’t know what I’ll find. The person could be sad or upbeat, chatty or quiet, in pain or resting comfortably. How can I plan for that? The answer is I can’t. No one can. But I can set an intention to be fully present, listening to what the person says, responding to their needs, questions, or doubts. As I sit with the person, whenever outside thoughts creep in, I remind myself: Hineini — Here I am, to listen and to support, and to be receptive to what this person may need.

In the book of Genesis (3.9), there is a point in the story of Adam and Eve, in which they have eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. Adam and Eve hear God moving about in the garden and hide from God, at which point God calls out to Adam “Ayeka” — where are you?! And we know that this is a pivotal moment. Because God is not only asking Adam where he (and Eve)

are physically, God is asking, “what is going on in your head? and where are you spiritually in that you now feel ashamed and are attempting to hide from me when up until now our relationship was open and relaxed? The word that God is hoping to hear from Adam is “Hineini” – here I am. I am ready to take responsibility. And I’ve done something I shouldn’t but am ready to face you. Instead, God is sorely disappointed. Adam and Eve eventually reveal their misbehaviour, even blaming the snake and each other, forgetting and disrespecting the importance of their relationship with God.

Have we missed out on Hineini moments in our relationships? Have we neglected to do what we need to be there for ourselves? When have we been called upon by family members, friends, community members, and beyond, for a kind word, for companionship, for putting up our hand and volunteering, how often do we actually stand at the ready and declare, “Hineini”. Here I am. Tell me what you need. How can I help?

Rabbi Larry Kushner who served for 28 years as the rabbi of

Congregation Beth El in Sudbury, Massachusetts told a story about Hineini. He recounted "When my wife Karen was pregnant with our second child, we lived in a little shoebox of an apartment in the town of Marlborough outside of Boston. In the dead of winter, and the middle of the night, she awakened me with a confession. ‘Larry, I know this sounds crazy, but I would give anything for a chocolate bar, especially one with almonds.’

Before she could even call it a request, I jumped out of bed, pulled my Levi's on over my pyjamas, a sweatshirt, then my snow parka, boots, hat, gloves. ‘Don't worry about a thing, sweetheart,’ I said.

When I got downstairs, I realised that it had been snowing for a few hours. The car was covered with a few inches of heavy, wet slush. But only after I had managed to clean it off did it dawn on me: Where would I find a chocolate bar in Marlborough, Massachusetts, in the middle of the night, in a blizzard? And then it hit me: Of course, at the Holiday Inn out on I-495.

The night clerk watched incredulously as a man in

pyjamas and a snow parka skidded to a stop under the portico, ran inside, punched quarters into the candy machine, waved and drove off into the snowstorm.

I presented my offering. Karen was a little embarrassed, but unequivocally grateful. As for me, I had learned something precious about myself. It made me happier to drive around in the middle of the night looking for a chocolate bar than to do what I wanted and remain in a warm bed. By letting go of myself, I was happier than if I had tried to please myself.

Larry didn't hesitate. He didn't think about the late hour or the cold or the snow. In that moment, he forgot about himself and responded Hineini. Perhaps his hineini wasn't as dramatic as God calling Moses at the burning bush or stopping Abraham from killing Isaac, but Larry's hineini moment connected him to his wife. For when we say hineini to another soul, when we forget ourselves and are fully present with another human being, we are no longer alone.

The Sfat Emet, one of the greatest Torah scholars of his generation in the 19th century, teaches that on the day of Yom Kippur, all of Israel, the whole community of

God-wrestlers, is meant to become one. So this is our moment. Hineinu, here we are. As we experience this together, for the rest of Yom Kippur, let each of us ask ourself: how will I take hineini into my life? It is so easy to check out. So easy to pretend we're spending time with someone while being distracted by our phones – physically there but emotionally not. When we are needed, when our friends, our family, and our community calls upon us, will we respond, "ani po", or will we say, "Here I am, ready and willing. How can I help? *Hineini*."

Rabbi's Discretionary Fund

There are individuals in the community suffering financial hardship. This fund makes it possible for the Rabbi to provide assistance to those in need.

Donations may be made directly to the Fund by cheque, payable to "Bristol & West Progressive Jewish Congregation", and marked "ATTENTION: Rabbi's Discretionary Fund". Monies may also be transferred directly.

Please email Rabbi Monique if you would like to help or need help. All enquiries are kept confidential.

When any choice is no choice



Peter Brill

This article was previously published in the Bristol Post.

As the debate about Brexit rumbles on, the noises from ‘across the pond’ are perhaps equally unsettling.

Even though it is not our country and, in theory, has nothing to do with us (unless you’re a US citizen living in Bristol), many of us are likely to be sitting nervously in front of our TVs tonight watching the outcome of the US Presidential election.

Why? Because the world is now a very small place. The impact of decisions by voters, politicians, community or religious leaders in one country, can have a profound effect not only on their own fellow citizens, but on citizens and nations much further afield.

I am saddened by the circus that the US elections has become – more so than ever this time around. It would appear that many voters are seeing this as an election of ‘the lesser of two evils’, whichever candidate they believe

that may be. It’s a case of Hobson’s choice: where the choice itself is no real choice at all.

Whatever the result, the impact is likely to be far reaching. The war of words *could* become something more physical. No, I’m not suggesting Trump and Clinton will resort to a fist-fight to settle the result. But, as we have seen with the Brexit Referendum, there is the potential to divide a nation, its communities and even individual families; to set one faith, culture or ideal against another and to drive a further wedge between the politicians that, in a democracy, are elected by the people and the people themselves.

Do I fear for Bristol’s faith and ethnic communities as a direct result of the outcome of the US election? No. Does it concern me that type of lowest-common-denominator debate and rhetoric we have seen and heard over the past 12 months in both the UK and US is promoting the worst kind of attitudes against those that are ‘different’, or in a minority, or vulnerable? You bet!

There is a saying: “In God we trust”. While I write this column as a representative of one of Bristol’s Jewish Communities, I don’t personally believe in God.

That doesn't mean I'm not spiritual, or disrespectful of the beliefs of others.

My only hope is that, whatever entity (or entities) may influence peoples' attitudes and actions across the planet, we can trust it to influence positive change for all our futures.

**e. e.
cummings'
"Birkhat
HaShahar"**



David Goldstein

I love this poem. Of course, e. e. cummings doesn't call it "Birkhat HaShahar". He's not Jewish and, in any case, he doesn't give his poems titles.

But it captures so much that the traditional Jewish morning blessings seek to express – the daily revival of the soul, the mystery of the creation of something from nothing, the radical amazement that is the true root of religious feeling, the "opening of the eyes".

As an Unorthodox Jew, I am always seeking for ways to express what religion means to me, and this poem of cummings speaks to

me so much more clearly than the traditional Jewish liturgy.

I'm keen to hear from others who have a favourite piece of poetry or prose which expresses for them some aspect of their religious feeling (or "spirituality", if you prefer that word). Feel free to email me if you would like to share something. Who knows, we might together create an alternative siddur!

i thank You God for most this amazing day:
for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite
which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and
of the gay
great happening illimitably earth) how
should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any-lifted from the no
of all nothing-human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

e. e. cummings (1894 - 1962)

My working life

Madge Dresser



It was ironic to be asked to describe my working week just over a month after I retired. This immediately posed a dilemma - do I tell you what I did as a full-time academic historian during the last 45 years? Or do I relate what I am doing now-post-retirement, post-Brexit and post-Trump?

The fact is I seem to be doing pretty much what I have been doing before I left the University of the West of England, namely: teaching, researching, writing and organising History-related activities outside the academy. The beauty is I no longer have to grapple with vast swathes of on-line marking of first year History essays, the down side is that I no longer have a salary. Like most newly retired professionals, I am busier than ever

Still, those long years of service have secured me a decent pension (so far) which is more than most folk enjoy so although I want to build up a career as a freelance author, events organiser and

public speaker I do so in order to give meaning and structure to my day rather than to put bread on the table.

My research and teaching centre around 18th century British history and increasingly contemporary history. My main interests have to do with ethnic and race relations, migration, slavery and gender. Articulating the experience of those whose history has been largely ignored and confronting historical controversies in a nuanced and fair minded way drive my work. Social justice is the common thread. No prizes for guessing that such a focus derives in large part from my Jewish identity.

Now a Visiting Senior Research Fellow' at UWE which title allows me to access crucial library databases so necessary to my research, I continue to supervise a PhD student, give the odd lecture to post graduate students and undergrads. I am also continuing to work at the University of Bristol where I shall supervise undergraduate dissertations and teach on a number of courses about Slavery, Public History and the like.

Having finished editing and co-authoring *Women and the City: Bristol 1373-2000* earlier this year I

am now putting the finishing touches on a chapter on 'Slavery and the country house' for a book edited by David Cannadine and Jeremy Musson on *The Treasure Houses of Britain* for an Anglo-American market. I am currently working with Sheila Hannon of Show of Strength Theatre on a revised version of her play on the British inventor Sarah Guppy who lived in Bristol from the 1790s to her death in 185?



Succot at BWPJC



Drumming workshop run by Max Ottolang



Tot Shabbat

Victoria Rose Bailey

Tot Shabbat services are an absolutely fantastic introduction to services for children under 6.

Many of us who are parents of pre-schoolers feel that bringing such young children to normal Shabbat services is a real challenge so BWPJC's recent introduction of a Tot Shabbat is ideal.

Rabbi Monique creates a service which is fun, spiritual and educational and all the children who came asked to go again. Rabbi Monique puts lots of effort in and fills the Tot Shabbat with music and a sense of theatre.

My daughter and another young boy who attends were still singing Rabbi Monique's songs and doing the dance moves weeks later!

Having such young children (Imogen is 9 months old and Rose is 3 years old) means that

a Tot Shabbat is my only opportunity to attend a Shabbat service so I really hope the success of the last two Tot services will encourage more parents of very young children back to the synagogue.

It's a fun, friendly service - if you have pre-schoolers it would be great to see you there!

I run an organisation which matches generous hosts who have a spare room with destitute asylum-seekers and refugees. We have had some hosts and placements in Bristol for some months but have suddenly had a spurt in guest requests and just not enough hosts to keep up.

I wondered if anyone might be interested in partnering with Refugees At Home to find hosts in and around Bristol. All our details are all on www.refugeesathome.org or I would be happy to talk to anyone interested.

Many thanks,

Sara Nathan

info@refugeesathome.org

My creative life

Rebecca Lucas (9)

When I'm not at school, I mainly focus on school. But I also have hobbies such as piano, swimming, tennis, acting, singing and dancing. I enjoy these activities but they mainly all take place on the weekend, so



it's hard to get a friend around. Recently, I have done three acting auditions. One was for the touring company of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, and the other two were for films, in one of which I would have played Dot Edison, with Benedict Cumberbatch playing Edison himself. The casting director asked me to audition for the role of Dot after seeing me audition for another film earlier in the year. Sadly, I did not get any

of these parts, but my hopes are set on the future.

I am Grade 1 on piano and am currently playing pieces from the Young Pianist's Repertoire Book 1. I enjoy my instrument but it can sometimes be a bit stressful. My mum used to be a semi-professional pianist, and her sister is a professional pianist in the USA. My dad played the piano growing up, and my brother plays the guitar, so music runs strongly in our family. I hope to make lots of progress with piano.

When I am older, I want to become an actress or a vet. I have two adorable kittens at home. Smudge and Soot are their names. I like to take full responsibility for them (although mum does the litter tray).

I hope that more acting opportunities come up in the future.

My creative life

Michael Lucas (12)

In my free time, I swim and play guitar. I can play tennis but not very well. The rest of my time is spent either sleeping or doing homework, now that I am in Year 7.



At my old school, last year my swim team got through to the National Primary School Swimming Championships finals. We travelled to Sheffield for the event. Although we were placed 18th out of 24, I am really proud of our achievement. My best stroke is backstroke. I train several times a week with Bristol Penguins. I am

working to achieve county times by the end of this year.

In music, last year I got a merit in Grade 4 guitar, and the year before my friend and I won a competition in school for Years 5 and 6. We played Blackbird by Paul McCartney. I have already performed at my new school for my year and have been asked to perform for the whole school. A few friends and I have also formed a band, and I am writing music for the band to play.

All of this keeps me pretty busy.

Who is a Jew?

*Commentary on the Lunch
and Learn with Rabbi Danny
Rich.*

Hati South

My immediate answer was “ME!” and I got a laugh, which was something. My instant answer when people have asked me this question before is, “anyone who believes in G-d and practises the Jewish faith” but over the past year of attending the shul, I have realised that it is much more than that.



Over the past month, I have been taking part in National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo), a task undertaken to write 50,000 words in 30 days and I was inspired to write a book about my faith and belief. During the research for this book, I was made more and more aware that being a Jew is more than just Challah and Chutzpah (although these are my favourite parts).

Reading the parasha a few weeks back about Sodom and Gomorrah made me think about how Abraham questioned G-d and fought for the rights and lives of others. I fundamentally believe that this is what it means to be Jewish; we are revolutionaries and educators in justice and compassion and it is our duty to question everything.

I was privileged enough to attend Rabbi Rich’s Shabbat service and following discussion and it struck more of a chord with me than I had imagined. I found myself agreeing with everything he said and was inspired to hear that he is steadfast in his belief in Liberalism and progression as I am. As a young Jew who is new to the shul, I can become nervous about expressing my views (I can hear some of you who know me well, pondering how it’s possible for me NOT to speak), so it was refreshing to be given the courage to believe in my own views.

I believe, wholeheartedly, that we are here to “bring the world under Your (G-d’s) unchallenged rule” by which I mean, it is our job to bring peace, justice and compassion to the hearts and minds of everyone, no matter their heritage or religion.

When Danny said to us that his membership entry test was to tell him a story that made him believe you were Jewish, that rang true with more than a few of us. He said, being Jewish is about our story and I agree completely; I believe it to be at the very core of who we are as a people. If you need proof, spend year after year in a shul and hear our story retold again and again and hear our Rabbi's and members discuss with you new and relevant meaning every time. I found it fascinating to learn that there was a time where we changed our traditions to suit more modern ideas and obstacles such as the history behind changing our descent from father to mother, which made me think of all the other times we have shifted our movements in favour of more progressive and realistic practices.

We are a people of movement, physically and spiritually and I am so inspired to move forward with my own study but also to become more involved in the shul and it's wider circle of influence. Our traditions and practices remind us of who we are but once reminded, we need to be a people of action.

I'm am so humbled and grateful for Rabbi Rich taking time to come and speak and eat and laugh with us and I am so excited to see who will visit us next.

Tony Dickinson

I'm a Jew, and nobody will convince me otherwise.



On Saturday I attended the morning service lead by Rabbi Rich, which was very enjoyable and then his presentation in the afternoon entitled "Who is a Jew?" I was very interested, as a consequence of my own experience and Jewish journey to date, in hearing what our Senior Rabbi had to say about this issue. As I sat there and listened to the Rabbi and the anecdotes he gave to demonstrate his position I often felt he was talking directly to me personally as I fitted a lot of what he said and the examples given.

The points he made as to who he believed was a Jew and how they then fitted in to what was currently Jewish status requirements was of a great interest to me especially in view

of recent research into the subject of Rabbinical and personal conversion.

Please see.... <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Rabbinical-vs-personal-converts-to-Judaism-Whats-the-difference-472829>

Long story short, I was first drawn to Judaism in my early teens. I had no exposure to Judaism or any religion as a child so had no leaning to it other than a very strong gut feeling that it was right for me. My Father once told me, following a discussion about Judaism and Zionism, that "I was going to bring nothing but trouble upon myself if I carried on down my Jewish road."

Some years later an elder brother from my Fathers first marriage asked if I was wearing a Magen David because of Dad. I was somewhat taken aback by this as I had always been lead to believe that my Father was a Baptist. My brother explained that Dad was a Jew albeit through the patriarchal line. I felt a massive weight lift from me as if my gut and blood had been vindicated.

It is a huge regret but I never discussed what I had been told with my Father. The story has since been confirmed by all three of my elder brother's and I have been able to confirm several facts in the story and I have absolutely no doubt that my Father was Jewish. Unfortunately the story is further complicated by illegitimate off spring which makes proving my Jewish Status complicated and difficult. Those who listened to Rabbi Rich where told that this sort of story was not uncommon.

For most of my life I have felt Jewish. For one reason or another, mainly fear of rejection as a consequence of my Jewish Status or perceived lack of it, I never felt confident enough to take it any further or though I did always declare myself and complete my census return as Jewish. I find this somewhat interesting in view of the above mentioned research. I also had a huge problem with conversion. What was I converting from? I was never Christened, Baptised or confirmed into any other religion.

As I grew older the religion grew and grew more strongly in me and I had this growing pull to do

something about it but lacking the confidence it was easier to just ignore the ache and do nothing. Due to a life changing incident

two years ago I decided enough was enough and that I had to find my home spiritually as well as community wise.

I put the conversion and status issues to one side and took a deep breath as well as a leap of faith in an attempt to find some spiritual and cultural peace of mind. After contacting several Rabbi's and Shul's I eventually ended up at Bristol thanks to the welcoming contact I had with Rabbi Monique. I have made many new friends all of which have and are helping me on my current journey. I've started the adult education and hopefully my route to conversion which will bring me home and acceptance as a Jew by my fellow Jews.

I have to say I still have a slight problem with conversion but the need to come home outweighs this and I will do what I need to do to achieve my dream. My experience since embarking on this part of my journey has been mixed. Most Jews are accepting of me but there are some, 'pure borns' for want of a better term,

who clearly don't and won't ever accept my status now or after conversion and this I feel is very sad and especially so in our Liberal Shul.

The 'pure born's need to accept the reality of the real world - mixed faith marriages, resurgence of faith in future generations and diluted ancestry are all issues that are realities of the real world today. To ignore them will result in Judaism dying on the vine and that would be the greatest of tragedies.

Rabbi Rich indicated his belief was that birth was really irrelevant to whether you were or not a Jew spiritually which is all that really counts. I think this is right but for some strange reason despite knowing I'm a Jew and that nobody will convince me otherwise I still yearn that my Jewish status, either by birth through the patriarchal line or by conversion was acceptable to all.

Blast from the Past

All these photos appeared in previous editions of Alonim. Sorry, no prizes for guessing the year they appeared.





Focus on nature

Changing weather

Jack Wolf



It's been cold this week, as the swathe of Arctic air that has been covering the country gave us a taste of real winter temperatures. I don't mind the cold - although scraping the car in the morning is a bit of a nuisance - because I find if I dress warmly I don't feel it. I tend to feel warmer in a cold snap of dry arctic air that taps the mercury at round about minus 2 than I do at plus seven in a maritime cyclone that just brings damp and rain. This is, I think, to do with the wicking power of moisture that draws heat from the body in general more readily than dry air seems to do - though it may be purely psychological. Perhaps I feel warmer because I like the bright sunshine and the white frosty ground that tends to accompany high pressure systems in the winter. I'm not, like most of us, a fan of wind and rain.

British winters have been getting warmer and wetter. December 2015 was the warmest on record, and we have not seen significant snowfall in this part of the country for several years. What we tend to see is rain, rain, and more rain. Violent Atlantic storms are becoming more common, bringing with them high winds and vast amounts of water that gets dumped in a very short space of time onto high ground and into our river systems. Flooding often results as this bulge of water runs downstream, spilling over onto floodplains when it reaches flatter land. The word 'floodplain' is of course, significant. In years gone by, certain parts of the Somerset levels were considered sacrificial land - to be used for grazing during the summer, but left unstocked in the winter in order to act as a sponge for the rains that were usual in the winter. Now of course, all land is expected to be used all year round, and that causes problems.

There are ways of mitigating flooding, though. Dredging is the tried and tested method but it's expensive, needing constant repetition, and by speeding up the flow of water in one place it can

cause flooding downstream where the river has not been cleared. Moving the problem on is not the same as sorting it. But there are other solutions, which deserve serious consideration. Reforestation of high ground that has been cleared for sheep farming or grouse shooting is one. Trees lock water in the soil, slowing the spread of heavy rains and keeping run-off clear of the waterways. They can act as an upstream barrier to flooding which is cost effective, ecologically friendly, and capable of providing income to those hill farmers who have been repeatedly hit by low prices in the meat industry. Alternatives include the creation of wetland bird reserves and nature corridors - which in addition to reducing the risk of flooding increase local biodiversity. Potteric Carr Nature Reserve, near Doncaster, kept the south of the city dry when the north went underwater in the floods of 2007.

The most interesting methods involve using natural structures such as fallen trees and straw bales to build upstream 'leaky dams' on rivers that flood repeatedly. After the town of Pickering in Yorkshire was flooded four times between in

1999 and 2007 the residents got together and constructed their own version of a beaver's lodge - called a bund - a couple of miles above the town to let the river swell slowly and gradually and avoid any flood 'bulge' reaching the town. Their efforts seem, so far, to have worked. In Boxing Day 2015 when much of the North was underwater, Pickering avoided disaster, and stayed dry. Similar schemes have been effective near Glasgow and on the Somerset levels.



Partly flooded arable land in Somerset

Keep warm and dry, everyone!

Have you heard the one about the imam, the priest and the rabbi?



Jeanette Monaco

A review of 'The roots and branches of Jewish comedy' a DAVAR talk by Maureen Kendler

Some years ago when I was a university student and on the dating scene, a Jewish boyfriend from Boston who was aware of my partial Italian family origins, told me a funny Jewish joke that has always stuck. "Ahh, Italian Catholics and Jews. They have a lot in common, but there are some subtle differences," he said. "Have you heard the one about the difference between the Italian Catholic mother and the Jewish mother? The Italian Catholic mother runs around the house chasing her misbehaving children, screaming, 'You kids, you kids, you're driving me crazy, I'm gonna kill you!' The Jewish

mother runs around the house chasing her misbehaving children, screaming, 'You kids, you kids, you're driving me crazy, I'm gonna kill myself!'

So, we see here there may be some similarities in the way comedy constructs stereotypes around nationalities, religion and the role of the mother. However, in this example there's a crucial distinction in the way the Jewish mother is written as the butt of the joke. One of the reasons why this joke has remained in my memory so clearly is most likely an effect of its underlying seriousness. We might guess Italian Catholic women wouldn't 'literally' kill their offspring, but somehow the image of self-sacrificing Jewish mothers prods us on another emotional level. We can laugh at its surface premise; we 'get it' because it is another example from a body of jokes about internalising Jewish mothers we've come to know so well, often recognised in Jackie Mason's stand-up routines or Woody Allen films. But Jewish mother jokes of this

kind did not play a major role in the early history of Jewish comedy. This kind of Jewish humour, as Maureen Kendler asserted in her recent DAVAR talk (12.9.2016), is a unique, modern 20th century invention. Jewish women, Kendler reminded the audience, “were amazing examples of survival” during times in history when many did, literally, sacrifice themselves for the sake of their children. “Once these struggles stopped they had to be made fun of.”

I have jumped ahead a fair bit here in my attempt to stress a key point Kendler made early in her talk about what distinguishes the lengthy history of Jewish jokes from other comedy, from its biblical and Talmudic roots to the present day. Behind every Jewish joke is the punctuation of some serious business. They are “substantive”, always about something. They are not whimsical or abstract, but cover a diversity of themes such as anti-Semitism, food, family, mothers, business, the immigrant experience. Many

Jewish jokes will reflect different moments in history but may still incorporate core themes and elements. They are “ironic”, “sarcastic”, “subversive”, written with a critical edge, criticising something, such as an authority figure, for example, rabbis or, looking outward, the highest government authority. During Purim, for example, one can dress up as a “letz” - a “scoffer” - a cynical, disrespectful person; a trouble-maker who is usually viewed negatively. But for this one day a year the letz can make fun of others, dress up as a Rabbi and make jokes about them. In the 15th and 16th Century Purim celebrations created a carnival atmosphere to such an outrageous degree that they were told to tone it down.

In Jewish comedy nothing and no subject is ever sacred. From authority jokes to those that express diaspora narratives or even motherly themes, the core of the humour is rebellion, in which Jews find laughter through tears during times when they were powerless to

make change. Kendler drew attention to the ghetto humour specific of the context of the Second World War when jokes captured the pain of Nazi persecution by turning around the situation. By telling jokes about outwitting the persecutors a wonderful wish fulfilment can be enacted in the face of terror. Taking note of all of these points I was reminded of the poignant, but controversial Holocaust themed comic film, *Life is Beautiful* (1997), by the Italian director, Roberto Benigni, who also played the lead role. The film, for me, seems a perfect illustration of the comic rebellion, brave in the face of much criticism considering the subject matter, that Kendler described. Benigni's character Guido convinces his young son that the concentration camp where they've been taken is the setting for a complex game in which the boy will win points after performing a series of tasks, with the ultimate prize being a war tank. With so many Holocaust films offering war destruction and terror,

capture, camp death or lone survival narratives, this film presents a new challenge to audiences. Those elements are still obvious in the film but when portrayed through subversive humour we are forced to ask ourselves, Do we have a right to laugh in the face of such real horror? For me the tears came along with the laughter, but what I found most refreshing was the possibility of imagining the catharsis in making fun of a Nazi officer as Benigni's Guido mis-translates in comic terms for his son, the officer's commands to suit his survival needs.

If such jokes offer the chance to laugh through tears they also combine the binary opposites of pessimism and optimism, as noted in this following joke considered by Kendler:

A man called Katz walks past another man called Cohen who is sitting alone, naked except that he wears a top hat. Katz asks, 'Why are you naked?' Cohen replies, 'It's okay, no one's coming.' 'Why then are

*you wearing that top hat?
'Because, maybe someone will
come.'*

The example communicates a wonderful case of comic absurdity with its combination of no logic, and yet total logic. It does not make sense, yet it reveals hope, an optimism accompanied with Cohen's naked pessimism: Well, maybe someone *will* actually come after all. Talmudic humour embraces its own logic also, often setting itself against secular education in ways that assert Talmud is superior to all other knowledge. Jews, these jokes convey, are superior in their Talmudic learning – no Jew would survive without it. Even when a joke illustrates the inherent contradictions of the learned Rabbis, there is no problem with this illogicality – this is the beauty of the Talmud. We can't be out there in the world, the jokes say, but we are managing just fine here on our own. They are defensive in making inward jokes about the Talmud itself, but this is in fact the nature of survival humour. The Talmudic feature of answering a question with

another question also finds its way into Jewish jokes.

Of course, as Kendler reminded us, Jewish comedy can be traced all the way back to the bible. Biblical texts were not written with the intention to entertain, however they show obvious elements of wit and edgy, bitter humour. She noted there are fifty mentions of laughter in the bible, reminding us that the name Yitzhak itself means laughter. Other details are just as subtle. When Sarah, for example, realises she is going to give birth, she responds with an ironic, fearful and nervous laugh. The bible is a text that enjoys word play with Hebrew being a language that lends itself usefully to puns. In one example of the teasing nature of biblical puns, Kendler cited the story of Joseph who is imprisoned in the same dungeon as Pharaoh's butler and baker. The butler and baker have dreams on the same night which they relay to Joseph for interpretation. Joseph interprets the butler's dream as, "Within three days

Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position.” When the baker offers what he saw in his dream, Joseph interprets it with a slight addition: “Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head, from the rest of you; he will hang you on a tree.” To quote Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, whose webpage offers a useful analysis of this example, the power in the joke in this instance, or “the element of surprise”, is in the act of listening - hearing it, rather than just seeing or reading the words:

This is humour at its blackest. The reason for its presence in the Joseph story does not concern us here, but the point is this: the Torah is written to be read aloud, and several of its literary devices depend on this fact, one above all, namely the power of the next word to confound our expectations, based on what we have heard thus far. Sometimes the result is humorous, at others the opposite, but in both cases the result is to make us sit up and pay attention.

[\(http://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5768-vayetse-leahs-tears/\)](http://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5768-vayetse-leahs-tears/)

The subtlety in Jewish jokes, like puns or humour in the Torah, must be said out loud for listeners to experience their full impact. Since its origins Jewish humour has forced us to “sit up and pay attention”. With its contradictions, ironies and sarcasms, it has teased us, prodded us, presented us with intellectual challenges in rebellious and often uncomfortable ways, while simultaneously eliciting chuckles and a few belly laughs. In this sense its purposeful self-reflexive qualities have inspired us to appreciate the serious and hopeful elements of Jewish history. In closing, I will leave you to ponder another joke offered by Kendler. For best effect, remember to say it out loud to a willing listener:

An imam, a priest, and a rabbi, in their efforts to further the cause of inter-faith relations, gather for their weekly spot of golf, but find they are waiting a very long time for a group ahead of them to move on. The caddy returns when he discovers the reason for the delay is that the group ahead are 'blind golfers' – they can't see a thing.

The imam responds by saying, 'Ahh, Allah, praise Allah, that there are such wonders in the world.'

The priest responds by saying, 'Praise be to Jesus, such miracles can happen, let their souls be touched.'

The rabbi responds by saying, 'So, they couldn't choose to play at night-time?'

Psalm 14: 'The fool says in his heart/There is no God.'



Michael Picardie

In the synagogue we feel the same dramatic, cathartic experience as in a Greek drama even when we know that a Redactor living in 6th century BCE Babylon probably edited the Torah and other Redactors went on editing the Tanakh till it was declared Holy Writ by the rabbis in Hellenistic and Roman Palestine. According to the Documentary Hypothesis the Jahvist, the Elohist, the Priestly Codifier and the Deuteronomist probably wrote the whole of the Pentateuch which existed in separate scrolls or orally since at least Moses' time in the 13th century BCE or embryonically since the legends of the patriarchs began to circulate say, sometime between the 19th and the 15th century BCE. The liturgy itself is organised on dramatic lines. If God exists, suggested the first Jewish existentialist Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) may He not work through the authors

identified in the Documentary Hypothesis? May we not go back to Kierkegaard and accept the psychological and moral reality of the myth of the man, the knight of faith like Abraham who through conquering the irrational murderous pagan Ur-God, allows his beloved son to survive the *Akedah*, retrieves the myth of the good God, which (especially we would say after Auschwitz) is - what? A way of filling our empty atheistic unbelief? Lacan suggests we have an unconscious need for an Imaginary reflection of the good Other to balance the horror of the ineluctable Real which castrates or defeminises us unless we also bridge the gap between our split self through Symbolic discourse.

Why is an atheist equated to a fool? Because perhaps there was no empirical science in ancient Palestine. So magical belief prevailed and Job's Adversary was a deadly threat. Only in ancient Greece and her colonies from the 6th century BCE were there the empirical sciences of biology, physics, chemistry, geometry, cosmology, geology, ethics, logic - not in ancient Judah and Israel. Ancient Palestine may have produced great prophets and moral legislators but civilizations which thought about

thinking and dared to challenge magic happened in the Greek city-states. Socrates paid the price for thinking about thought and knowledge. He listened to his "Daimon" which expressed God's Symbolic / Real / Imaginary discourse. Secular knowledge and a philosophy of history only arrived with the Greeks and the Romans in Palestine. Only Philo and Josephus and one Dead Sea Scroll raised theological and philosophical issues. Judaism, even Jesus, had to do with ritual and charismatic moral practice. Shlomo Sand, Stephen Hawking, Richard Dawkins and Brian Cox are not fools. Einstein did not believe in a personal God and when he said "God does not play dice" he was talking about the hypothetical but within our universe, the immutable laws of physics, chemistry and biology for which "God" was merely the symbol. As S/he is for moral/political ethics.

The answer to the question, "Why is what is?" is that our existential being-in-Being is a fact of our facticity. We are *Dasein: Being-There-in-Being*. Surely that is awesome enough and imposes on us humility and reverence *a priori*? Kant thought that contemplating the stars above induced us to contemplate the

"moral law within" - the laws of ethics - which - given the normal love of a family and a community - we know intuitively constitutes our duty which is to help realise the Other's aim and object - his end - and protect each other from crime and tyranny. We know this intuitively. *from before - a priori*.

Maimonides (1135-1204) perhaps the greatest Jewish thinker of all time after Moses, or at least of the Middle Ages, and his father, who was also a wise judge (a *dayan*) did not make foolish mistakes not only because they believed in the Mosaic God's law but because they knew what was happening politically in the world. The Maimons did not wait in 12th century Cordova to be murdered by the Almohades invaders of the Spanish Caliphate but migrated to North Africa and then to Fostat near Cairo where Moshe ben Maimon became physician to the vizier of Saladin the Caliph.

Marx said religion was the heart of a heartless world. But Marx was not a fool because he was an atheist.

Until I went back to the New South Africa - I didn't realise how right Marx was. Religion is not only the opium of the masses when used to collude with injustice, but is indeed the heart of

a heartless world.

At least the anti-apartheid of the soul, if not yet the anti-apartheid of a new society, had miraculously come about. And for newly converted black Jews at Temple Israel in Hillbrow, redemption came in the form of education in social thought, with none of the masochism of the suffering Christ who renders unto Caesar what is Caesar's.

The final verse of this psalm reads:

“O that deliverance for Israel would come out of Zion!

When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people,

Jacob shall rejoice, Israel shall be glad.”

Israel means for me he who struggles with the meaning of God in the real societal and political world which ordinarily denies divinity. What does Jacob mean? It meant a deceiving man who knew how to survive. Jacob only becomes Israel after has proved that although hurt he is almost as strong as God but only on that one night when he struggled with himself as projected out in his dream of the divine stranger. Zion means any

pinnacle of spiritual or political or technical or artistic achievement.

The LORD means JHVH more than Elohim – more than the union of all the gods – the latter a bridge concept between paganism and monotheism or for me universalistic ethics: as in the *Shma*: not only that Elohim is our God, but that the battle-cry of JAH-VEH! – ADONAI! is an appeal for oneness in the face of a degraded form of atheism in which technology becomes as monstrous as fundamentalist religion.

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