



# A Jewish-German Alliance for Europe's Future

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**Address by Rabbi Baroness Julia Neuberger, London, to the first graduating class of rabbis in Germany since 1942, Dresden, September 13, 2006.**

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**Rabbi Julia Neuberger**

When my mother was dying, five years ago, she kept talking about going home. "Mummy, you are home..." I said, as she lay dying in her apartment in London. "Ach, no", she said, "I mean home, I mean Heilbronn." She may have left Heilbronn am Neckar sixty-four years earlier, and returned only once since the war, but it was still home. And as her school friends came one by one in her last years to see her from Heilbronn, and as she recalled the great kindnesses done for her parents after they had left, she felt homesick.

For, quite unlike the norm, all her father's friends – who had been with him in prisoner-of-war camp in France in the first world war – had gone into their apartment, packed everything up, and sent it to England. After my grandparents had settled in temporary accommodation in London, they were surprised to receive, even after the start of the war, packages and large containers of furniture sent by grandfather's old friends and drinking companions. These men were no Nazis, but old friends who were appalled by the turn of events, and remained friends of my grandparents until the end of their lives.

So I feel quite German, although I was born and bred in London. As someone who feels distinctly that I am, in some sense, a German Jew, there can be no greater pleasure than to see a rebirth of Jewish life, a reaffirmation of Germany as home to one of the world's significant Jewish communities.

## The past as prologue

It cannot be like it was before – of course it cannot. But the Heilbronn is an important step for Germany and Judaism alike.

It is a new college with deep historical roots: born of the Enlightenment and the German reform movement, and strongly affected by the scientific study of Judaism (the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement). The whole non-orthodox movement in Judaism has its origins here in Germany. Though it is at its peak in the United States, reform, liberal and conservative Judaism have made great inroads in Europe and Latin America; now it is developing in the former Soviet Union and increasingly in Germany.

It was in Germany that the great phrase *Deutsche Bürger Jüdischen Glaubens* was first invented. It was the emphasis on being "German citizens of the Jewish faith" that led to the idea that modern Reform congregations would use that title – the synagogue where I grew up in London is the West London Synagogue of British Jews. Judaism, more than a faith, became equated with faith.

This was the contrast, almost the counter-attack, to those Jews who converted to Christianity in the

late 18th and early 19th centuries here in Germany to achieve their education and preferment in whatever field of endeavour they had chosen. The list is endless, but Heinrich Heine is always cited as the epitome of that, closely followed by Felix Mendelssohn's father.

It was Moses Mendelssohn, grandfather of the composer, who had first thought Jews should read the Bible in German and not in Hebrew. Moses Mendelssohn began that great process of the Jewish enlightenment here in Germany, translating the Hebrew Bible into German, arguing for a new and different approach to faith.

It was that thinking, that opening of closed doors, pulling back the shutters, opening the curtains, letting in the light, which led to that most creative period of all, the one which people describe as the period of German-Jewish symbiosis. It was a period when scholarship, both secular and religious, met; where art, literature, music and the cultural life in general flourished, German and Jewish – the one inspiring the other – from the novels of Lion Feuchtwanger, my forebear, to the scholarship of Gerschon Scholem.

It stretched from the philosophy of Walter Benjamin to the great art history of Aby Warburg, Ernst Gombrich, Fritz Saxl and Gertrude Bing; from the educational achievements of Kurt Hahn at Salem to the extraordinary art of Lyonel Feininger or Max Liebermann, Herman Struck and Ludwig Meidner. There was something about the German-Jewish symbiosis which allowed talent to flourish, and a certain form of scholarship to be established.

And then it ended, abruptly, in a terrible cataclysm. But now it is being reborn in this new college, with its superb faculty where keen students will go on to serve in east-central Europe and the former Soviet Union as well as Germany. Perhaps with these new rabbis we will again see the emergence of a capacity for cultural and intellectual endeavour that finds a *modus vivendi* with a religious life that is not orthodox, but is demanding. Perhaps, this time, those of great talent will not simply rebel against the strictures of orthodoxy of a narrow variety, but will come to an accommodation with their Jewish tradition.

The Judaism they will be offered by those trained here at Abraham Geiger College will be intellectually rigorous, scholarly and open. The new generation of rabbis trained here will also be inheritors of that German-Jewish symbiosis. Can they – in their own way – reinvent it? Can they in turn make Germany's Jews great again, and encourage a particular kind of thought and experiment and excitement?

## Seven principles

To realise such ambitions, we need to think about what these new rabbis will need to function in the modern world – here in Germany, in central and eastern Europe, or further afield. It will not be easy. Seven great qualities will be needed.

First, the rabbi must be scholarly. Germany produced some of the greatest rabbinic scholars before the war. Amongst our own non-orthodox colleagues there were towering figures such as John Rayner, formerly Hans Rahmer, and the revered Ignaz Maybaum. Scholarship is essential, being able as it is to stand firm by knowing both the traditional way to read and interpret the texts and by applying modern scholarly techniques to them, as my revered teacher Rabbi Dr Louis Jacobs, who passed away in July 2006, did. The modern rabbi must know what she or he is talking about, and must have one area of scholarly expertise at the very least.

Second, the rabbi needs to have an understanding of other faiths. Here in Germany they need to be able to work with Christians of all denominations and with Muslims in a growing Muslim community. They cannot be lazy about this, or disinterested, because in the new Germany, no

rabbi can possibly ignore the requests for a Jewish presence, or in any way fail to explain, speak, be a representative, encourage, comfort and otherwise be a mover and shaker in the interfaith world.

Like the late lamented Rabbi Dr Albert Friedlander, like Rabbis Nathan Peter Levinson and Henry Brandt, they need to make their interfaith work a key part of what they do. They need to know something of other faiths, as much as they need to talk about Judaism, and they need to be prepared to engage with other people of different faiths with a level of intensity and excitement that brings insight to all involved.

Third, the modern rabbi needs to add to that the capacity to teach about Judaism more widely. Not exactly interfaith, but speaking on the radio, teaching in schools and colleges, being an exponent of Jewish teaching and Jewish values to an audience far wider than the Jewish community itself. There is a widespread hunger for a sense of values, for a sense of spirituality. In Germany particularly, where the Nazi past recedes ever more rapidly into the distance, there is a desire to hear from Jews. In large parts of Germany there have been no Jews for seventy years or more, and these new rabbis have an enormous representative role to play.

These new rabbis have to teach Judaism within their communities. But they will also need to teach beyond their communities, generalising where they can, firm in their values, and explain to the wider community who they are and what they stand for. It is not an unusual thing to ask. In Britain, Rabbi Lionel Blue has been a leading radio personality over many years, cultivating Jewish humour as a way into Jewish learning and understanding. The late, lamented Rabbi Hugo Gryn was equally loved as a radio personality, and others are joining them in explaining, representing, and rejoicing in their Judaism.

Fourth, any rabbi worth his or her salt also has to build up his or her congregation. And here in Germany, it is a major task to build up congregations, when so many of the members are émigrés from the former Soviet Union, who know little about their Jewish roots. It is painstaking, tough work: teaching, encouraging, enthusing, building communities that are vibrant and fun, where people rejoice in their Judaism and learn much.

It is hard work. My colleague and friend Rabbi Willy Wolff is carrying it out in Rostock and Schwerin in northeast Germany, giving new communities a chance to rebuild German-Jewish life, while speaking Russian, even though he is German-born.

In Britain there are many examples, but one that stands out is Rabbi Andrew Goldstein, in Northwood & Pinner. He started there as a student rabbi. His son is now his rabbinic colleague there, and a tiny community has grown to be one of London's largest and most significant, non-orthodox congregations. That's the model we should look to. It is scholarly, enthusiastic, welcoming, plays a key role in the wider community, and as a result of inspirational rabbinic leadership, everyone feels like they have a part to play, some work to do, and some more to learn.

Without that community-building, there can be no community. The modern rabbi has to learn how to do it - by charisma, of course, but also by sheer hard work. And a part of that is learning to be a real communal rabbi, the pastor, who is with his community in the bad times as well as the good. German Jewry had an extraordinary example of that in Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck, who stood by his community and went with them to the concentration camp. No one is expecting that - but a willingness to be there, to bring comfort, to support, to enthuse, is the very minimum a modern rabbi will need.

Fifth, the rabbi must be a politician, playing a variety of roles. Here in Germany it lies partly in talking about Jews, Judaism, and sometimes Israel in the wider community. The issue of Israel and the middle east has led many rabbis to a form of politics they perhaps did not want to get into. In

my own country, Rabbi David Goldberg is a known critic - though by no means always - of Israeli attitudes and politics. He speaks and writes publicly, against what many Jews in the community want him to say.

But that is the other rabbinic political role - to be true to oneself and one's principles, often Jewish principles. And the politics can also be about other matters- racism, for instance, or discrimination against any particular group. Rabbis for Human Rights have stood up for the Roma as well as for the Palestinians. Political rabbis fight the cause of the oppressed wherever they are, citing the exodus from Egypt, from oppression to freedom, as their reason for campaigning as they do. And no modern rabbi can neglect those skills, or the need - sometimes - to be seen to be publicly involved in such a campaign.

Sixth, there's the tough, often dull business of being the manager: running, organising the congregation. The young rabbi, often the only full-time employee, finds he or she has to do everything - from painting the walls to running the religion school, from choosing the music to representing the Jews of his town at some interfaith service.

The rabbi has to be a manager - of people, of time, of energy. He has to work out how to make a congregation work, and how much help he or she needs. It is no easy task, and rabbinic training rarely prepares you for it. The rabbi has to make everything work, enthuse others to help, and then manage what they do. It's a key skill, poorly recognised, because it seems such a small part of a rabbi's life.

Seventh, there is the role that everyone expects a rabbi to play: spiritual leader. In an increasingly secular world, for most of us, the rabbi is seen as someone who holds timeless values, whose insight into the life of the soul is profound, whose understanding of the spiritual life is great. And yet many young rabbis will not really have an understanding of what is meant by all this. It is the years of experience working with the sick and the dying, managing a difficult congregation and suddenly getting an insight into something above and beyond, that really gives one the spiritual awareness. You cannot teach spirituality. You can only learn to feel it.

And in everything else our young rabbis are going to have to do, with that long list of what they will need to be, spiritual leader is the hardest. For spirituality is hard to define and even harder to pass on. It comes by example, by moments of insight. Those who knew Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck always say that one had a sense of the spiritual in being near him. Those who have been in the same room as Nelson Mandela say the same.

These are exceptional cases. But our young rabbis can also give their communities the chance to experience the spiritual; to give people times of quiet, of meditation; to show them the spirituality that comes of doing good deeds for others in the community, and the insights they acquire in their pastoral work. That is the most we can ask.

Our new rabbis, then, must be spiritual leaders, scholars, managers, politicians, teachers, enthusiasts, interfaith activists, pastors, and community-builders. We ask an enormous amount. The amazing thing is that we will get most of it, and we will grow to be proud of a new generation of German rabbis, scholarly, committed, building the new German Jewry, the new Russian Jewry, the new eastern European Jewry. They will be multi-tasking, multi-talented, and very committed.

It is a great privilege for us to see them take on this role here in Dresden. That role is greater, more challenging, and more demanding of their personal resources in intellect and character than it has ever been in Jewish history. From today they pioneer a new chapter in German-Jewish history, a chapter that will enrich the entire world Jewish community, and also strengthen and enrich the already vibrant liberal, integrated multicultural society that is the new Germany. It is an awesome task. May they have the strength and courage to face it.

*Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren, Ich bedanke mich sehr herzlich für ihre gütige Aufmerksamkeit.*

Julia Neuberger is a British rabbi and a member of the House of Lords. Among her books is *The Moral State We're In* (HarperCollins, 2005). This is a slightly shortened version of her address at the graduation ceremonies of the Abraham Geiger College in Dresden on 13 September 2006. On the following day, the three rabbinical graduates were [ordained](#), the first such occasion in Germany since 1942. Rabbi Neuberger is a member of the Board of Governors of Abraham Geiger College.

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