Halleluja! Praise the Lord!

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A Jewish lawyer preaches to a church of mostly black Christians. A book excerpt.

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!

by Aubrey Rose

Aubrey Rose, a leading figure in Jewish community life, is also patron of the New Assembly of Churches, whose members are almost all Black Christians. Aubrey Rose became involved when, as a lawyer, he drew up the New Assembly constitutional document, and he was invited by the church to be a guest preacher. He describes what happened next.

The black pastor welcomed me with warmth and sincerity, saying how pleased he was that I had agreed to preach the sermon that day. His Church of God, basically Afro-Caribbean in membership, with branches in Jamaica, Barbados, Nigeria, and, surprisingly, Egypt, was celebrating its 25th anniversary.

In the main hall, noticeably free of any statue, painting, or religious representation, groups of young men and women were engaged in Bible study. In rooms above, children"s religious classes were in progress. Babies, old people, choristers in blue dresses and white blouses, were assembling, neatly, smartly dressed. This was an occasion.

In his office, the pastor told me of his regard for the Jewish people, for Israel, for the heroic figures of the Old Testament. A *Magen* David (Shield of David emblem) hung from the wall,

but no human representation. Others joined us; the pastor"s svelte and smiling wife; another visiting minister and general secretary of the New Assembly of Churches, the national umbrella

body of twelve churches in which each church had many congregations, teachers and leaders of local communities. The general secretary confirmed to me that his organisation encompassed over 300,000 souls including members and their families.

We stood in a circle in the minister"s room and, as is their custom, held hands. Each uttered prayers in his or her own words at variable speeds, a babble of conflicting voices, like a Jewish committee meeting, but with a sense of awe, eyes tightly shut.

We then entered the packed church. The congregation were dressed in their smartest clothes. I was invited to sit on the platform with the ministers. Behind us stood a choir, 25 strong, mainly women. Below at the side an organist, prim, proper, in dark suit, white blouse, perky white hat. All the women wore hats.

The minister -- slow-speaking, sincere, dignified -- welcomed us (my wife and me), and gave thanks for 25 years of service and services. A visiting minister gave the invocation. All was spontaneous, nothing written, no notes, all natural, alive, as the spirit moved. This was no audience, no us and-them relationship. Bursts of thanks and praise rose from all over the room, punctuating prayers, creating a unity, a communal solidarity.

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And O! the music, the singing! Heart-warming, full of rhythm, beat, life. The choir was not for listening to, admiring, as if giving a performance; it led a full-throated mass sound of praise, drowning the organ. And if the spirit moved them, they repeated verses already sung. It was glorious. It was natural. My feet, unobserved, began to tap out the infectious rhythm. It had rarely happened to me in any other house of prayer.

Heroes

Two great heroes of my late teens and early twenties had been Mahaliah Jackson, the magnificent Southern Baptist black gospel singer, and Mordechai Hershman, a brilliant Jewish cantor. I knew their records by heart, from "I"m glad salvation is free", to the Jewish prayer for rain. They had much in common. Services, primarily, have to have feeling, not meaning. For meaning you study. Often out of feeling comes meaning.

The minister introduced me to the congregation. "Mr Rose is a Jew". Immediately a label, one I was proud to accept. It was a first, for them and for me. Another leader on the platform prayed for me, that I might speak well and have wisdom. He must have known my problems.

I thanked them, congratulated them. I was honoured. I understood how they, as immigrants, had met coldness from people who did not understand the heart of the stranger (communal nodding of heads, shouts of "Yes, yes"), but they had overcome problems (excitement, exclamations of "Hallelujah, praise the Lord"), they would continue to overcome problems (increased excitement, "Yes, yes" and "Yes Lord, praise be!", from all sides).

Easter and Passover

I compared Easter and Passover, quoted the teaching of the Rabbi from Galilee, related how Moses had spoken to Pharaoh as an equal and told him (the entire congregation in unison, before I could finish the sentence -"Let my people go"). I kept a straight face. Those words, I explained, had inspired the Negro slaves, as well as tormented Jews in the racist Soviet Union.

But the Israelites had to throw off the mentality of servants. This took 40 years, but it happened, and the people crossed over. ("Yes, Lord!) into the Promised Land ("Hallelujah", "Yes, yes, Lord", "Crossed over", "Praise the Lord!").

I quoted extensively from ancient Jewish sources; from the Ethics of the Fathers, Rabbis Hillel, Gamaliel, and ben Zoma. The quotation that struck the deepest chord was from Rabbi Akavya ben Mahalalel. If Akavya, a Talmudic rabbi of old, could have known to whom his words meant so much on that day, he would, I am sure, have been enthralled. He used to say, "Think on three things to avoid the power of sin: where you have come from, where you are going to, and before whom you will one day give an account and reckoning" (great shouts of agreement and recognition of truth). The visiting minister behind me was moved. He made me repeat the whole quotation. Akavya became a hero of the New Assembly of Churches.

I referred to the Psalms -- sing unto the Lord a new song (they knew all the Psalms). I ended with the quotation about how good it was for brothers to dwell together in unity. The congregation finished it for me (shouts of "Hallelujah", "Praise the Lord", clapping). I wiped my brow and sat down.

I had conducted services and given sermons in synagogues but I had never before experienced such a lightness of heart, such a sense of communal joy. It reminded me of stories of the 18th century Chasidic movement, whose informality in song and dance is now ossified in the formal patterns of prayer of modern establishments.

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We prayed for all those who were ill and anxious and needed to be healed. Not just a few sentences, but an actual physical act of prayer. Everyone bowed down on the ground, on hands and knees, and raised up voices, calling for a complete healing for many people; a hundred individual spontaneous prayers, a Babel of requests, from the heart, as well as the mind. Not only a cerebral invocation, but an emotional outburst. It would never have done in the Church of England. It is something most orthodoxies have recognised, this appeal to all the senses, something they have sometimes used, and abused, but have today largely forgotten.

We left before the service ended. It had begun half an hour late. It was clearly going on and on. The minister thanked me. His wife gave my wife and myself a gift of cake, excellent rum-drenched cake, which sustained us on our journey home. I recalled an old Jewish prayer and blessed the Lord who had preserved me, and kept me alive to take part in such an extraordinary day. Praise be the Lord! Hallelujah!

The article is an extract from Aubrey Rose"s new book *Brief Encounters of a Legal Kind*.

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"Lawyers and non-lawyers alike will find this collection of "encounters" a source of enormous enjoyment. That is certainly true in my case. Once I started on the trail of Aubrey Rose"s account of his experiences of over 40 years of practice I could not stop until I came, with regret, to the end. His stories are irresistible, amusing and humane. Easy to read they reveal a deep understanding of human nature". Lord Woolf, *Master of the Rolls,* from his Foreword.

"The striking features of this book are the lively simplicity of the author"s style, the tremendous variety of situations and problems he has faced in his practice and the humanity, tolerance and common-sense with which he has always tackled them." Geoffrey Bindman, *solicitor and Visiting Professor of Law, London University.*

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