



Sermon at Lincoln Cathedral, 23rd April 2006

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Rabbi Andrew Goldstein, Senior Rabbi of Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue in Northwood, Middlesex, U.K., preached this sermon at a service celebrating 350 years of peaceful existence of Jews in England since their return in 1656.

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Rabbi Andrew Goldstein

“On this day song will be sung in Judah: we have a strong city/ Open the gates so that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in...in peace, because they trust You” (Isaiah 26:1-3...one of this day’s readings). So Isaiah opened his oration.

It is the singing of songs that has led me to this fairly unique position today...a rabbi preaching in one of the great Cathedrals of this country. Later my synagogue choir will be singing a series of Psalms and songs in celebration of the 350th anniversary of the resettlement of the Jews in England under Oliver Cromwell in 1656, and the 13th anniversary of the founding of the present day Jewish community of Lincoln, and linking these anniversaries with two less joyful events in Jewish history. But before continuing let me give thanks that the Dean has allowed our choir to sing, and given me the immense privilege of preaching this afternoon.

Last weekend for Christians it was Easter and today’s readings reminded us of the hope Jesus’ resurrection brought to those who believe in him. For Jews it was Passover and we recalled the hope of new life that came with the Exodus from bondage in Egypt. May this service be another step on the road to redemption for all of God’s people.

When did the first Jew come to this city? Probably as a slave of the Romans, but certainly with the later invasion by the Normans, though the first positive mention is as late as 1159, but by then there was a considerable Jewish community in Lincoln, witnessed in stone and mortar in the Strait and Steep Hill leading up to this magnificent church, the core of which was built by Bishop Hugh of Avelon, friend and protector of the Jews. An earlier building was erected on this site with money loaned by Aaron the Jew, whose house stood barely 100 yards from this place.

When did I first come to this city: in March 1974 with my Confirmation class and we stayed in a

hostel at the Old Bishops Palace. Since then I have returned many times, usually with large groups of Jewish children, bringing them to the city that bears concrete witness to the glories of medieval Jewry like no other place in this country. In 1974 an elderly verger showed us round, but seemed reluctant to take us to a key place we had travelled up from London to see: the site of the shrine to Little Hugh, the boy they said was murdered by the Jews in 1255. The fourth of such Ritual Murder accusations in this country, and like the others leading to immense suffering by the Jewish community, 91 members sent to London on trial, 18 executed on this totally spurious charge. On our 1974 visit the verger eventually made it to the site of the shrine, then replaced with the small framed declaration of the terrible consequences of such accusations throughout Europe. It ended with: "such stories do not redound to the credit of Christendom. And so we pray remember not our offences, nor the offences of our forefathers..." I asked him "who does it refer to?" "the Jews". "Do you think they really killed the boy?" "Of course, the guidebooks say so". And indeed in the Cathedral shop they sold a facsimile of a 19th century book that detailed the terrible crime of the Jews. Of course, on being informed, the Dean of the day ensured his guides were re-educated. But it shows how persistent such legends are, and the harm they have done over the ages.

How times have changed, though I suspect not many a rabbi has been given the honour of speaking from this pulpit. Back in the 13th century unthinkable, and though Bishop Hugh was a good friend and protector the the Jews, I can't imagine Aaron, or Berachiah of Nicole, the then Chief rabbi of England being asked to speak. And we should remember that though this country has a fine reputation for tolerance, it was the first European country to completely expel its Jewish community, in 1290, and it took almost 400 years before we were allowed back. But thank God, how times have changed. King Edward may have ordered the expulsion of the Jews from England, but Charles II, following the Restoration, confirmed the right established by Cromwell in 1656 for the Jews to reside, trade, and worship in this country. And last month at a civic reception in London to mark the beginning of a year of celebrations of our return, a speaker pointed out that the only person present that night who had also been present at the banquet to mark the 300th anniversary of the Resettlement was the Duke of Edinburgh. A little known fact was also recorded, that the Duke's mother had sheltered a Jewish mother and her two children in Athens throughout the Second World War, despite several Nazi investigations of her. In a weekend in which we celebrate the 80th birthday of her majesty the Queen, we acknowledge the support the modern Royal Family has given to Anglo-Jewry and the various ethnic and religious communities that make up modern Britain.

Today is St George's Day. I last saw St George three weeks ago in Prague castle; a fine statue of Jiri as he's called in Czech killing the dragon (not sure what a dragon is in Czech). A reminder that our country's patron saint, born in 275 in Turkey, is also honoured by several European cities and countries. And what is English? Our Queen's consort was born in Greece, the Royal family itself of German extraction. And the great St Hugh, founder of this present Cathedral spoke French, as did Aaron of Lincoln . The first Jews that in England after Cromwell had set in motion their readmission were Spanish and Portuguese Jews from Holland. They were followed by Ashkenazism from Germany and in 350 years Jews from many different countries have made their home in this land. Their contribution has been considerable, just as was the contribution of the Jews in Norman times. This country has always been made up of citizens with different origins, and from the Norman French onwards successive waves of new arrivals have enriched our economy and culture.

May we remember this lesson of history as we seek to build in this country a society that is varied

and vibrant yet tolerant and peaceful. And may the conjunction on this St George's Day of a Christian and Jewish choir singing Psalms in this glorious House of God be a symbol of harmony and hope for the future. And may our coming together bring in heaven a smile of approval to the face of St. George and St Hugh, as surely it does to God's face whose blessing of peace we seek on this day.

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