



## ***The Key Challenges Facing the Jewish People***

### **The Morris and Manja Leigh Memorial Lecture given by the Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks, on 7 June 2010 to a JPR audience**

May I first of all just say what a privilege I regard it to be able to meet with you, the JPR. Thank you, Howard (Leigh), for chairing this evening and Harold (Paisner), for chairing JPR and may I wish Jon Boyd and the team every success. They are a wonderful organisation and very important. It is very important for us to be informed about our present and our future in a rational and research-based way and therefore may I wish you continued success in all the work of the JPR.

#### **Tribute to the late Morris and Manja Leigh**

May I also say what an honour, a genuinely humbling honour, it is to be able to say a few words in memory of the late Morris and Manja Leigh. Morris was such a lovely human being. I didn't know about his business career. I just knew him to be kind, wise, gentle and generous on an immense scale. I just found him to be a true gentleman. The Hebrew language has been around for a very long time, 4,000 years, probably the oldest still continuously spoken language anywhere in the world, and yet in all those 4,000 years, would it surprise you that there is no Hebrew word that means tact? You tell an Israeli this and they say '*ah, b'ivrit tact ze tact*' (ah, but in Hebrew tact is tact). Would it equally surprise you that there is no Hebrew word to this day for understatement? But Morris was understated. He just was. He did so much, but sought so little honour for it, so little attention. He was a wonderful, wonderful man. I loved him dearly. The first time we met, he told me how, as a child of eight, he had been in the choir of his shul in Stamford Hill and how much those memories, that love of Judaism and its traditions and its music stayed with him. Of course, Manja was gracious, warm, incredibly cultured, human and at the same time had a lovely gracious smile that lit up the room whenever she was there. To be able simply to pay a brief tribute to the memory of two remarkable people - we were so blessed - is a great privilege for me.

#### **The world has changed for Jews**

Friends, I can't possibly talk about all the challenges facing the Jewish world, but I just want to give you a brief insight into a couple of them. Let me begin with a story which actually happened and which was very flabbergasting at the time. Around September 1999, our office received a call from the professor of medieval history at Boston University, Professor Richard Landes. He asked whether he could please have an appointment to meet the Chief Rabbi as he had something extremely urgent to tell me. I was intrigued as to what possibly could be urgent about medieval Jewish history. I was enthralled, so I said let's meet and we met. The story he had to tell me was just remarkable. It turns out that Professor Landes is a specialist in millenarian movements. Millenarian movements are basically Christian *Moshiach Now* type movements, of which

there were many in the Middle Ages: the hussites, the ranters and the levellers. Of course, with the year 2000 coming up, it was a natural time to expect millenarian movements. And his study of millenarian movements had yielded the following law, that before every expected millennium, there is a wave of philo-Semitism and, after every millennium, a wave of antisemitism; he was sure that it was going to happen this time. The only thing he wasn't sure about was how, and this was his guess. If you remember, at that time four or five months before the millennium, there was an enormous worry about something called the Millennium Bug. His guess was, like everyone else, that come 1 January 2000, all the computers would crash and there would be total chaos, especially in the skies and with air traffic control. Somehow or other, he wasn't quite sure how, everyone would blame the Jews. That was his best working hypothesis. Well, you know, 1 January 2000 came and went, and we weren't able to do much about it - if you remember, it was a Friday night, although it did give us the chance for a wonderful gesture of solidarity. A couple of months beforehand, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey said: 'Jonathan, I know it's not your thing but we would love to share with you the celebration of the Millennium. Do you think there is some way we could do this? For instance, we are asking all of our members to light a candle for the Millennium'. I said: 'George, we'll go one better, we'll light two'. Anyway, obviously the Millennium came and went and it was *Shabbos* so we really didn't know. I went out to see the world on 1 January 2000 and the world continued on its accustomed course. The Millennium Bug, as you know, was a figment of someone's imagination and the result was that I turned to my wife Elaine and said: 'Landes got it wrong'.

And then came 29 September 2000: the collapse of the peace process in the Middle East and the beginning of the so called *Al Aqsa Intifada*. And then August 2001, that notorious United Nations Conference against Racism in Durban, which saw the launch of a new virulent form of racism, or at least antisemitism, and then a week later 9/11, and within two days a survey carried out by the Wall Street Journal of public opinion in Pakistan showed that at least 70 per cent of the Pakistani public was convinced that the Israelis had done it. And I turned to Elaine and I said: 'Landes got it right'.

That was a long time ago and the last nine years have confirmed all our fears. The world has changed for Jews. In 2000 you remember Israel launched a peace process and stood high in the opinion of the world. The Jewish community throughout the world had record levels of achievement, integration and success; antisemitism was at an all time low. Since then difficult things have happened, the Jewish world has been transformed in particular by three phenomena - number one: the return, horrific to say, of a new strain of antisemitism. Number two: the progressive and continuing international isolation of Israel. Number three: our own internal problems within the Jewish community. In Britain, globally in the Diaspora, sometimes a little less, sometimes a lot more, but on average one Jew in every two has decided not to marry another Jew, not to build a Jewish home, not to have Jewish children, not to continue the Jewish story. Those are the main challenges and obviously I am only going to skim the surface tonight, but I did write a book on all of this, my most recent book *Future Tense*. So the fact is with all the issues I am only going to look at just two of them tonight.

### **The climate in your head**

I want to share with you my own concern. Having been on the front line of the fight against antisemitism, (well, it's not just me, we've all been on the front line in the fight against antisemitism), making the case for Israel and the fight for Jewish continuity - as I wander through the Jewish world, I have been very struck by the way that not all Jewish

responses have been terribly productive. This has puzzled me and this is why I wrote *Future Tense*. Not only to go through the problems one by one, but also to say that I think that there is something systemic, something which we are getting wrong, something fundamental that generates responses that are not always productive. How can I possibly explain this to you except by way of a story and here it is. This is my favourite Jewish joke of all time and I share it with you. I was recently stuck in New York by the volcanic cloud so it all came flooding back. In this Jewish restaurant in New York in the Lower East Side, on a very humid summer's evening, one of the diners, a rather loud and not entirely civilised individual, *schlepps* the waiter over and says: 'Waiter, it's too hot in here. Put the air conditioning on.' The waiter goes out and comes back a few minutes later. Ten minutes later he says: 'Waiter, it's now too cold. Turn the air conditioning off'. The waiter goes out. A few minutes later he calls him over for a third time: 'Waiter, it's too hot again. Turn the air conditioning back on'. As the waiter is about to go out for the third time, a man just by the door says: 'Waiter, I feel so sorry for you. This man must be driving you mad' and the waiter says: 'Well no, actually, I'm driving *him* mad. You see, there is no air conditioning'. This joke was enough to tell me that sometimes the climate in your head matters as much as the climate out there.

### **The people that dwells alone**

And now I am going to tell you the moment when I suddenly realised that the climate inside was all wrong. The date is *Shavous* 2001. We are in Jerusalem, the best place by far to celebrate *Shavous*. We are having lunch with a former leader of Diaspora Jewry who had made *aliyah*, together with a very fine leader of Canadian Jewry, a former Justice Minister of Canada, Irwin Cotler, one of the world's great fighters against anti-semitism, and a very distinguished Israeli diplomat. Irwin and I were sharing notes about the forthcoming United Nations Conference in Durban and Irwin was explaining that Israel had mechanisms for dealing with things like governments but none for dealing with NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and had failed to understand how powerful an influence NGOs have, especially on the United Nations and, of course, they were key to Durban events. And so Israel found itself isolated. The Ambassador, attempting to cheer us up - he's a good man, and he meant nothing wrong, it was a beautiful thing for him to say, said: 'Twas ever thus. We are *am levadad yishkon*, the people that dwells alone'. And that, of course, was his definition of Jewish destiny- those famous words taken from the book of Numbers. We are a people that dwells alone and that was his view. And I have heard that repeated many, many times recently. In fact, on my way here, I was reading a provincial Jewish newspaper from last Friday which had a front page article on how isolated Israel is. This brings to mind those famous words and it was at that moment that a light exploded in my brain and I said: 'What makes you think those words are right?'

But of course, maybe they are right. First of all, remember who said them, the prophet Balaam, who was not entirely a friend of the Jews. Second of all, remember what the *Talmud* in tractate *Sanhedrin* says about precisely that passage: 'Every single blessing that Balaam gave eventually turned into a curse, with the one exception of *ma tovu ohaleha yaacov miskonotecha yisrael*'. As the *Talmud* says, this refers to *shuls* and houses of study. Without exception they all turned into curses. Finally, think of the word *levad* or *levadad*: is that a good thing to be in biblical terms? You know God creates the world and seven times pronounces it good: '*v'haya elokim ki tov*'. What is the first occasion the words 'not good' appear in the Bible? '*Lo tov lehiyot ha'adam l'vado*': 'it is not good for man to be alone'. Secondly, what does it say about a leper? A *metzora*? '*Badad yoshev mechutz lamachane moshavo*': He shall dwell alone outside the camp.

Most famously of all, on the saddest day of the year, we read the saddest book of the Bible, *sefer Eichah*, the book of Lamentations and how does it begin? '*Eichah yashva vadad ha'ir rabatiam*: how has the city, once so full of people, become so lonely?'

That is when I said to him (and this is the core argument of *Future Tense*) that if you define yourself as a people that dwells alone, there is every danger that you may find that that you become a people that dwells alone. And that is not a good way to solve the problems the Jewish people currently face. So let me relate that very briefly and very simply, the two major challenges that we are facing today as the Jewish people are antisemitism and Jewish continuity.

### **The virus of antisemitism**

I would describe what has emerged in recent years as a new strain of antisemitism. What is antisemitism, if you try and define it? Every time you try and define it you result in a series of contradictions. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jews were hated because they were capitalists and because they were communists, because they were rich and because they were poor, because they kept to themselves and because they infiltrated everywhere. Because, according to Voltaire, they are a superstitious people with a primitive religious faith. Because, according to Lenin, they are rootless, cosmopolitan civilians. Wherever you look, you find yourself faced with a contradiction and therefore I argue that the only way really to understand antisemitism is to see it as a virus. Now the body has this most sophisticated of all mechanisms called the immune system and the immune system is very good at dealing with viruses, so how does the virus beat the immune system? The answer is by mutating and that is how antisemitism always defeats every attempt to end it. It mutates and there have been, in broad terms, three mutations in the last 2,000 years and we are living through the fourth. What do I mean? Number one: If you look into the history of antisemitism you will see that it begins with the Hellenistic period, with the Greeks and the Romans, many of whom had quite negative things to say about Jews. Now, I don't see that as antisemitism at all. In fact the Greeks especially regarded anyone who wasn't Greek as merely a flock of sheep, so they called them barbarians. That's the sound that sheep make. If you're not Greek, then you're a barbarian. So they said not nice things about Jews, but they said that about everyone. It was like when the Mafia shoot you in the Godfather Part Two. Just before you sleep with the fishes they say: 'Nothing personal, strictly business'. So I don't call that anti-judaic sentiment that you find in a number of Greek and Roman writers antisemitism. I call that xenophobia, which is different.

When does it become personal? The short answer is that that happens pretty soon in the second generation of Christianity. All of a sudden the Jews were the people who didn't accept their own Messiah. A friend of mine, who is a wonderful literary guy in Washington, is writing a book about why Jews never accept the Messiah. You know the answer to the question: 'Has the Messiah come?' is always not yet. He's writing this brilliant book and whenever his publisher asks if it's ready, his answer is always: 'Not yet'. So with the birth of Christianity, suddenly a theological anti-judaism appears. Here you'll find it already in the Gospels, getting progressively worse from Matthew to Luke and then to John and you'll find it in the Church Fathers. So that is mutation one.

### **The beginning of a persecution society**

Mutation two is difficult to date but let's fix on 1096 when, on their way to liberate Jerusalem, the Crusaders stopped and massacred Jewish communities in the north of Europe. All of a sudden the Christian anti-Judaism becomes a kind of demonic anti-

Judaism. Jews are no longer merely the people who reject Christianity. They become the people who spread the plague and poison wells and desecrate the host, who kill Christian children to use their blood to make *matzas*. They become Satan, the anti-Christ, the agents of evil in some way and that spreads its ripples throughout the Middle Ages. That moves from simple to demonic anti-Judaism, what one Christian historian calls the beginning of a persecution society.

We know mutation three. You can date that to 1879 when the new word antisemitism was coined for the first time by a German journalist called Wilhelm Marr. It is fascinating that the word antisemitism did not exist before 1879. All of a sudden, Christian anti-Judaism mutates into racial antisemitism. And of course, at that moment, already in 1879, it moves into an altogether darker movement because you can change your faith but you can't change your race. Whereas Christians would work for the conversion of Jews, racial antisemitism could only work for the extermination of the Jews.

We are living through the fourth mutation. It differs from the others in various respects. Number one: the new antisemitism, unlike the old, is not directed against Jews as individuals. It is directed at Jews as a nation with their own state. It is directed primarily against the state of Israel, but it gets all Jews as presumptively Zionist, hence imperialistic, and usurpers and all the rest of it. And all the medieval myths have been recycled; it was Jews who were responsible for 9/11, it was Israel who was responsible for the tsunami, with nuclear underwater testing by Israel. What, you didn't know this? I always wonder, have they blamed us for the oil spill yet? Just wait, be patient; they're working on it. So that is the first characteristic which didn't exist before, because Jews, as a nation state in their own land, didn't exist before. In other words we have at least 82 Christian nations as part of the United Nations, there are 56 Islamic states, there is only one Jewish state but that, for many people, is one too many. It is far too big - what do the Jews need all that land for? There's a lovely park in South Africa, with all the lions and giraffes, called Kruger National Park, it's a really lovely park. The state of Israel is smaller than the Kruger National Park, but it's too big. So we now have this new form of anti-Zionism about which I think the sharpest comment was made by Amos Oz; he said that in the 1930s, antisemites stood up and sent Jews to Palestine. Today they stand up and say 'Jews out of Palestine'. They don't want us to be here, they don't want us to be there, they don't want us to *be*. That is the first difference.

The second difference is that whereas other forms of antisemitism, especially racial antisemitism, were carried by national cultures so that you could ask at the time of the Dreyfus trial, is France an antisemitic country? You could ask, is Germany, is Austria, is Italy, is Britain an antisemitic country? In those days, antisemitism was carried by national cultures and so there were some antisemitic nations and there were nations that were distinctly not. But today there is no such thing as a national culture. Today antisemitism, hate and paranoia in general, but antisemitism specifically is carried by the new global media which are extremely focused and extremely targeted so that you can get major incidents of antisemitism in a country that is not antisemitic at all. If we take a slightly different look at it, the suicide bombers of 7/7 were, after all, born in Britain; they lived in Britain, they were educated in Britain, their own friends and neighbours thought that they were perfectly nice people. They didn't know until after 7/7 and after those video testimonies were shown what deep hatred they had conceived of Britain. So it is very hard to identify and it's very easy to become very paranoid. America thinks this about Britain: that Britain is an antisemitic country. They don't realise that there is no such thing any more as antisemitism as a phenomenon of national cultures unless a

politician decides to make that part of the public discourse of politics. When that happens, as has happened very recently in the case of Turkey, we're in a very dangerous situation. But the new antisemitism, by and large, is not conveyed like the old.

And finally the legitimisation of it. We often fail to realise that it is not easy to justify hating people, it really isn't. It is very easy to move people to hate but it is very hard to make them feel that they are justified in hating. And therefore antisemitism has always had to be legitimated by the supreme source of moral authority in a culture at any given time. And what was the supreme source of moral authority in Europe in the Middle Ages? The church, religion. And therefore antisemitism in the Middle Ages was religious. You could not justify hatred on religious grounds in the post-Enlightenment emancipated Europe of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

What was the highest authority in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? The answer was science. Science was the new glittering paradigm and therefore you will find that 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century antisemitism was legitimated by two, what we now know to be, pseudo-sciences. Number one: the so-called scientific study of race and number two: the so-called science known as social Darwinism. The idea that, just as in nature, so in society, the strong survive by eliminating the weak.

Today science is no longer the highest authority because, although it has given us unprecedented powers, among those powers is the power to destroy life on earth. So what is the supreme moral authority today? The supreme moral authority since the Holocaust, since the United Nations Universal Declaration in 1948, is human rights. Therefore, if you are going to justify antisemitism, it will have to be by reference to human rights. And that is why in 2001 at Durban, Israel was accused by the human rights NGOs of the five cardinal sins against human rights: racism, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, attempted genocide and crimes against humanity. And those are the three things that make the new antisemitism different from the old.

### **The power of not seeking to be alone**

And now let me tell you what I wonder. In 2003, (I think I've got the date right) we persuaded the European Union to hold an international conference on antisemitism at Brussels in the EU headquarters. When we got there, to my horror, what did I see? The conference hall was full, but at least 95 per cent of those present were Jews, quite possibly 99 per cent of those present were Jews. I thought *Ribbono shel olam*, is this how you fight antisemitism? By telling a whole hall full of Jews that *goyim* don't like us? And that was when I got up and said to Mr Prodi, who was then head of the EU and to the other European leaders who were there: 'Jews cannot fight antisemitism alone. The victim cannot cure the crime, the hated cannot cure the hate. I will stand up for the right of any Christian anywhere in the world to live his or her faith without fear but I need you Christians to stand up for my right as a Jew to live anywhere in the world without fear. I led the campaign against Islamophobia in Britain and I was always and am always willing to lead that campaign, but I need you to stand up and oppose Judeophobia.' And *baruch Hashem*, our community really listened and shared that view and as a result, we are perhaps the only country in the world at this point where the fight against antisemitism is led by non-Jews, by the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into antisemitism headed up by Denis MacShane, by the Parliamentary Committee against antisemitism, still headed by John Mann. By the interdepartmental government committee covering nine departments set up by Gordon Brown, and continued by David Cameron, which is

monitoring antisemitism in so far as it touches on every aspect of national life. And this is a wonderful thing and is something that must be continued. In February 2009 the British Foreign Office and Home Office hosted an international conference of parliamentarians against antisemitism - hosted by the government, not by the Jewish community. Parliamentarians came from 40 different countries, almost none of whom were Jews.

Do you remember Ken Livingstone, our 'very special person'? Ken Livingstone, who invited a certain Imam to Britain twice, whom we didn't think very highly of. If you remember, on the first occasion, the Jewish community protested, with zero impact. He simply ignored the community and went ahead. On the second occasion, who opposed the visit? Not just Jews. It was a combination of Jews, of Hindus, of Sikhs, of moderate Muslims, of gays and of women's rights activists and the second time Livingstone just backed down without a fight. That is the power of not seeking to be alone.

### **Let us turn outwards**

Don't think we are *am levadad yishkon*. I am tremendously sorry because I have taken up all my allotted time talking about one problem but I hope you will see how it affects other problems at the forefront of Jewish life. If we think of ourselves as being completely alone we turn inwards, we talk to ourselves, and the end result is we don't affect the world and we really make ourselves miserable. I think there are enough people making us miserable that we don't have to do that ourselves. Although a good bit of Jewish misery never did anyone any harm. But the truth is that this is not the best way forward. It is also not the best message to give to our children and grandchildren if we want them to continue the struggle. Because the truth is that if we are people who are destined to dwell alone, do we want our children or grandchildren to carry that burden? I don't think so. If the message that comes out, as it came out of American Jewry for the past 20 years is: 'What makes Jews Jewish?' Answer: the Holocaust. The 614th Commandment is: don't hand Hitler a posthumous victory. When a whole community spends its major efforts building Holocaust museums, Holocaust memorials, Holocaust seminars, Holocaust conferences, Holocaust courses at university, Holocaust books... In the 1980s one in every four books published on a Jewish theme was about the Holocaust. Believe you me, we need to remember and that is why I hope we have decided collectively in Britain to be upfront, to let the broadcasters in to our lives as Jews, to talk out there and we will discover when we do that actually, non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. I have always found that to be the case. Non-Jews tend to be embarrassed by Jews who tend to be embarrassed about Judaism. When we all talk we find that yes, we may have enemies, but we also have friends: many real, good and true friends and we will have more if we make the effort. Therefore my argument is as the Jewish world worldwide is turning inwards that that is precisely the wrong way to go. Let us turn outwards. Let us share our faith with people, especially, when you can do so as sadistically as I can every time I do *Thought for the Day*. There they are, about to enjoy their day, and lo and behold, just as they're full of cheer and the joys of spring, here comes the Chief Rabbi with a sermon. All I can say in my defence is, I try to make it short and simple.

### **The voice of hope**

So, friends, my argument is: Don't define ourselves as the people that dwells alone. Define ourselves, as I do in the last chapter in my book, as the voice of hope and the conversation of human kind. Jews, by surviving against all the odds, by believing in God who acts in history, by returning to their homeland after 2,000 years, by actually surviving as the state of Israel in a very difficult and hostile Middle East and in doing so,

becoming, out of nothing, world leaders in medical, agricultural and computer information technology. We are a people who represent the power of hope. By defining ourselves that way we will have many more friends, many more Jewish grandchildren and altogether a safer and brighter future.