

July /
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Number 32

NLPJC Newsletter

North London Progressive Jewish Community



NLPJC events....

• Shabbat Service Leaders

During July we have visiting rabbis to lead our Shabbat morning Services. Student Rabbi Sandra Kviat will lead on 5th July, and Rabbi Hillel Athias-Robles, the assistant rabbi at Northwood & Pinner Liberal Synagogue on 19th July. Rabbi Cliff Cohen will then be leading all the Shabbat morning Services from August to December. We hope you can come and meet them all and enjoy the different experiences.

Venue: The Community Rooms – see Calendar on back page for details

• Hackney Limmud

Limmud is 'a big, beautiful festival of Jewish culture and learning' – and it's coming to Hackney! You cannot afford to miss this exciting event. There's loads of stuff to do with Hackney, and several of NLPJC's illustrious members / leaders are involved.

Sunday 14th September at Petchey Academy, Stoke Newington.

See flyer insert for details

• HHD Tickets

Ticket Application forms for the high Holidays will be sent out by post in early August.

Thinking of joining us?

If you've been thinking of joining us for a while...why not do it now? We offer a pro-rata system for anyone joining throughout the year – and High Holiday tickets are included! You can contact our administrator, Julia Chalfen, nlpjc@liberaljudaism.org for a membership pack or phone Rabbi Cliff Cohen on 020 7403 3779 to discuss membership options.

See our website at www.nlpjc.org.uk

What is Judaism For?



Rabbi Cliff Cohen

Last week, I was asked by a local school (local to me, that is, it was a long way from North London) to recommend a good one-volume book on Judaism. I looked along my shelves, and was spoilt for choice – Basic Judaism, Introduction to Judaism, Teach Yourself Judaism, This is Judaism, Being Jewish, Judaism for Dummies and perhaps a dozen similar titles stared down at me.

They are much of a muchness, these books. Writing styles differ, as does the degree of obligation they place on tradition, but the essential elements of Judaism are always more or less the same. Shabbat and the festivals are always there, as are Kashrut, Tallit and Kippah, Revelation, the Hereafter, the Messiah, and a list that most of you could probably complete for yourselves.

Yet when Hillel was asked to expound the whole of Judaism while standing on one leg, he

one leg, he said "What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. The rest is commentary. Go study it". He did not mention Shabbat. He did not mention Kashrut. He did not even mention the Messiah, though at that time Messianic expectation was high. In fact, the Table of Contents in all the one-volume books is simply a familiar list of things that Hillel did not mention.

I think Hillel got it right. Judaism is a way of treating others with dignity, and every Jewish tradition is either a means to that end or a way of reminding ourselves of the task. Not that the books are wrong. The commentary does matter, and we should study it. But there is a trap built into this, and we all too easily fall into it. The temptation is to study and describe what Judaism is, while forgetting to mention what Judaism is for. Hillel's summary is a much-needed reminder that if anything, it should be the

other way round.

So next time we find ourselves discussing which is the correct shoulder on which to rest a Torah scroll, or whether beans should be kosher for Pesach, or how much Hebrew we should have in our services, let's not forget that all this is merely commentary. The Holy task is bigger than that. And in the wise words of Rabbi Tarphon, we are not required to complete it, but neither are we free to abdicate from it. Let us all spend just a little more time and energy working towards what Judaism is for.

Rabbi Cliff Cohen

Rabbi Cliff is rabbi to Thanet & District Reform Synagogue, and Jewish Chaplain to Canterbury Prison.

He is NLPJC's maternity cover rabbi, whilst Rabbi Shulamit is on leave.

Mazel Tov ~ A Baby Girl!

Mazel Tov to Rabbi Shulamit & Rebekka on the safe arrival of their baby daughter, and sister to Chanya, born on Wednesday 11th June, weighing 8lb 5 oz.

Mother and baby are doing well, or, as Rabbi Shulamit said "nothing a good night's sleep wouldn't sort out..."


liberal judaism

NLPJC is a constituent congregation of Liberal Judaism

Feminist Prophets at Shavu'ot

At the Shavuot evening study session this year (still one of the most interesting events in NLPJC's calendar) Rabbi Sheila Shulman, founder and Rabbi Emerita of Beit Klal Yisrael congregation, spoke on Feminist Prophets. I found her words an urgent call for our times, and would like to share some of her themes, and some personal reflections.

From the opening reflection that the major Biblical prophets are male and misogynous, Rabbi Sheila made the point that they are not inspirational, criticizing their own times, without regard for better, future times. Also, they are problematic for women, especially women "on the boundaries". The specific references this brought to my mind were the prophets' tendency to declaim the Hebrews as "whores", and my analysis that most religious laws constricting women are aimed at those "on the edge of society" - defined as not attached to a man.

For Rabbi Sheila, this traditional prophetic voice is strident. When it answers the Divine call with "Hineini" -

meaning "Here I am", it is a very personal voice, one which has been denied women. (I would add that, within the Tanach, women rarely have a name, let alone a voice.) Thus, women need still to articulate their individual voice and, as she reminded us, had started to do so with the religious feminist movement of the late 20th century. That voice had described a quieter and more diffident God, yet somehow it had been swallowed up or silenced.

So, speaking at Shavu'ot – the great Festival of Revelation, Rabbi Sheila was calling for a reclaiming of the word "vision" by women, whereby we take on the mantle of becoming "a community of interpreters", as the founding mother of Jewish feminism, Judith Plaskow, has termed it. (This follows Plaskow's observation that religious authority rests on specific interpretations by different "communities" – whether the rabbis' claim that Sinai bestowed authenticity on rabbinic interpretation, or the Kabbalists' assertion that mystical meaning is more fundamental than literal meaning, each is claiming authority for their own

"community of interpreters".) Rabbi Sheila emphasized the urgent need for a communal awakening of the Jewish women's movement at a time when, as she said: "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention!". This she described as a time for relational community building – a building of our own communities and a building of caring relationships with other communities. She claimed this as the time for a prophetic voice which will challenge the status quo of power and violence. The time for a feminist voice and vision.

I was struck by the irony, and importance, of delivering this message at Shavu'ot, a moment when women were specifically excluded. Whilst God commanded Moses to prepare all the people for the message from Sinai, Moses instructed the men to prepare - by not going near the woman; thus women did not stand at Sinai. As Plaskow and others have observed, the male community of interpreters has been writing religion in its own image for a long time!

Joanna Ryam



Shavuot Study evening at NLPJC.

(Below): Claire Helman (L), Sue Lukes and Rabbi Sheila Shulman (R)



NLPJC Members Peter Bergamin & Rhiannon Beswick on their Shavuot Experience.....

After a long day spent in the form of a big Canadian lump lazing about on the lawn in the sunny confines of Stokefest in Clissold Park (I'm reminded of the old Woody Allen joke, "When I go to the beach, I don't tan, I stroke"), it was time to move all the way across the road for the Shavuot service led by Joanna Ryam, followed by a study session bearing the overall title *Moving Mountains*. No irony lost on me there, then.

The first guest speaker was **Rabbi Sheila Shulman**, who spoke on the challenges faced when confronting the theme of Prophecy from the point of view of a lesbian and feminist. It was inspiring and refreshing to hear someone who is not afraid to dispose of the rhetoric in their search for the ultimate truth in things. I was particularly thrilled when she reminded us (and I hope she doesn't mind me paraphrasing here), that "to criticise" belongs to the vocabulary of the optimist and idealist, and not to that of the pessimist. Plus it was great to finally have someone else to smoke with.

After a short break came **Dr Maurice Glasman**, who addressed the theme of **power, powerlessness, and the ethics of power**. He spoke of the need to "rediscover our Jewish prophetic voice, without being Messianic, and be prepared to make friends and enemies in surprising places." Not afraid to put his money where his mouth is, Maurice has organized the Inter-faith discussion group, centred around Stoke Newington and Stamford Hill, and is the Director of the Faith and Citizenship Program at the London Metropolitan University, where he is also a Senior Lecturer.

There was then a short break which enabled me to move a few mountains myself: namely those of cheesecake into my mouth, before reassembling for a panel conducted by Rabbi Sheila and Maurice, and effectively chaired by Sue Lukes.

Peter Bergamin

The last speaker at the Shavuot evening was Dr Stanley Hordes from New Mexico.

He spoke on the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico. It was a fascinating subject. It seems that after he came to Santa Fe to work as chief historian there, local people started whispering to him about their neighbours and how they followed some seemingly Jewish traditions. He discovered that there were quite a number of people who, although they thought of themselves as Catholic, actually did follow kashrut or lit Shabbat candles. (One girl told him her whole family were 'allergic' to pork).

He discovered that, after the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella forced Jews to either convert or leave in the 1490s, many of them went over to the New World – or Mexico – which Columbus had just 'discovered'. After New Mexico was settled many of them went up there, and their descendents still remain, still holding to some traditions and still marrying within their group, even though they mostly do not think of themselves as Jewish. Some however have now reclaimed their Jewish roots.

Dr Hordes has written a book about the subject entitled 'To the End of the Earth', and is president of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies, at <http://www.cryptojews.com>

Rhiannon Beswick

My Jewish Journey



Naomi Strauss

I grew up in Hampstead Garden Suburb. My father was a refugee from Berlin (he left Germany in 1934) and my mother's family were Swiss, originally from Alsace. I have two brothers and an older sister. My older brother has autism and severe learning disabilities and my younger brother is my twin.

We belonged to North West London Reform Synagogue (Alyth Gardens) and I went there twice a year on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. As a family, there was a strong sense of Jewish identity even though we didn't follow much of the ritual. We did the bare minimum of blessings on Friday nights. My father couldn't read Hebrew so would read the bread and wine blessings phonetically in English to please my mother. We had extended family get-togethers on Seder night, Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah.

My twin brother and I went to Hebrew classes unenthusiastically

every Sunday morning. Ours was an unruly class and there was a period when we had a different Hebrew teacher each week. Even now, there's a particular smell of floor polish that takes me right back to those Hebrew lessons. I didn't absorb much Jewish knowledge but did learn to read prayer book Hebrew - very slowly, good enough for me to follow a service, just.

My twin brother had a bar mitzvah but my sister and I didn't. I had assumed it was just for boys until my parents and the rabbi suggested a joint bnai mitzvah celebration. I refused. I got a guinea pig instead.



Naomi and her twin brother Jonathan, 1970

In my teens I went to a Jewish youth club - B'nai Akiva and on an AJ6 Israel trip with my more orthodox best friend. I can remember feeling uncomfortable a lot of the time not knowing the words of the Hebrew songs and prayers, not knowing the kashrut laws and rituals.

My first job after I graduated from art

school was working for Jewish Care at a day centre in Stamford Hill, teaching arts and crafts. I loved being immersed in Hackney's warm Jewish heritage, which felt so different from the world in which I had grown up, and I developed a stronger Jewish identity and learnt much more about Jewish culture.

I did not belong to a synagogue for several years but now I am married to James, who is not Jewish, and we have two daughters who go to a multicultural primary school in Stoke Newington, and so it seems important to be part of a Jewish community again. The children have been coming to NLPJC since they were babies and I am keen that they have a strong sense of belonging to the community and that it feels comfortable and familiar to them. I feel lucky to have this community on my doorstep. It is a welcoming and inclusive community, a comforting and stabilising influence in a changing world, small and intimate enough to feel like an extended family.

My Hebrew reading is improving and I have just enrolled in the synagogue's leyning adult education class on Tuesday evenings. Since joining NLPJC, I have felt really proud taking part in the service, especially reading from the Torah on Simchat Torah. Next time, hopefully, I will be leyning too.

It's hard to express what being Jewish means to me but when I look at my paintings I recognise from their recurring themes just how essential my Jewishness is to me.

Naomi Strauss



Hannah Forbes,
NLPJC Treasurer

A Walk for the Gurkha Welfare Trust

On the 19th-20th July I will be walking 100km to raise money for Oxfam and the Gurkha Welfare Trust. I am doing this with three friends and we have been training for six months. The challenge involves walking 100km (or 62.5 miles or two and a half marathons) in less than 30 hours as a team of four. We are aiming to complete it in 25 hours, which will involve starting at 6am and walking through the night along the South Downs Way. Training has involved lots of walking, jogging, fitness work, trying out different socks, shoes and kit and some physiotherapy. (I managed to tear my hip flexor and tendon in the process...)

The reason I am undertaking such an insane challenge is to raise money for Oxfam and the Gurkha Welfare Trust. The money that I raise will be used to support Gurkhas who have served in the British army and been injured or who are now retired, as well as a range of Oxfam projects around the world.

The Gurkha Welfare Trust was established in 1969. It provides financial, medical and community aid to alleviate hardship and distress among Gurkha ex-service people of the British Armed Forces and their dependants after they have returned to their homeland of Nepal. By raising money for the Trust it can do more to help Gurkhas break out of the cycle of poverty, disaster and disease that often blights their retirement.

Oxfam fights poverty in three main ways: campaigning directly to people with the power to reduce poverty, putting pressure on leaders for real lasting change, funding long term development work to allow people to take control, solve their own problems, and rely on themselves, with support, whilst also responding to emergencies to try to save lives, and quickly deliver aid, support and protection.

If you would like to sponsor me please go to www.justgiving.com/hannahforbes. I'll let you know how the walk goes and promise not to be too graphic about my blisters!

For more information on the charities that I am raising money for please see: <http://www.gwt.org.uk/remit.html> and http://www.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam_in_action/

Hannah Forbes

NLPJC on the discovery of a lost treasure

What can better rouse your attention: a beautifully chanted song or an impressive speech? The founders of liberal Judaism voted in the 19th and early 20th century for "impressive speech". Melodies can distract, you may end up going with the rhythm without paying attention to the words of a song.

The founders of liberal Judaism came from a tradition, in which the whole synagogue service was sung, a very ancient religious tradition. The prayers were all sung to melodies fitting to the time of the year and on Shabbat even to the time of the day. This tradition is called "nussach tefillah" ("melody of the prayer"). The torah, the prophets and the five scrolls (Megillot) were also chanted according to traditional tunes. This tradition is called "torah trop" ("way of torah reading") or "leyning" (yiddish for "reading"). The music for the torah was transmitted together with the letters and the vowels: it is the 28 signs (strokes, curves, corners, dots) in the biblical texts that are not vowels.

These signs, the so called "Te'amim" ("meanings") or "Ta'ame maMikra" ("meaning of the Scripture") function as punctuation marks, they mark the stress of each work and a melody. This melody sounds different depending on the text that is chanted (torah or prophets or megillot), the time of the year (High Holidays or normal year) and the geographical region (for example western European or eastern European tradition and many more).

Now the founders of liberal Judaism came from a tradition, in which a whole parasha was chanted each week in the traditional melody. As the whole portion is often very long, sometimes five chapters, the text is chanted very, very quickly. The founders of liberal Judaism strongly disagreed with this custom. They wanted that people listen to what is said in the torah and this could be best achieved if a short portion of the torah is not sung along, but read slowly and meaningfully and is translated. With this innovation of reading the text instead of chanting it, liberal Judaism deliberately broke with the traditional Jewish law (Halakha). The talmud for example teaches: "R. Shefatiah said in the name of R. Johanan: If one reads the Scripture without a melody or repeats the Mishnah without a tune, of him the Scripture Says (Ezek. XX, 25): 'Wherefore I gave them also statutes that were not good and ordinances whereby they should not live'" (Megillah 32a), that's means: reading the text without melody is an invalid liturgical reading.

In liberal Judaism ancient traditional law has a vote but never has a veto, it is not the highest value in religion. Our reason to start discovering the ancient torah trop is therefore not because the talmud said so. We start this journey because we are progressive Jews, responding to the demands of our time and times have changed since liberal Judaism was founded.

For some people today listening to someone talking does not rouse their attention. We are talked to so much every day in the radio, in the underground, in shops and it is often easy to have a nap during a speech. But someone singing a song intensively and stressing the meaning of the text by the way he/she sings is different from everyday talks. To hear the words "still he delayed"

(Gen 19:16) spoken or chanted in a long chain of notes going three times up and down, as the musical note in the torah here wants us to chant this word - makes a difference.

So can't the ancient musical traditions be used today in the 21st century to do exactly what the founders of liberal Judaism wanted us to: rousing our attention to the texts, touching our souls with the meaning of the texts? At NLPJC we'll give it a try and start to learn the traditional melodies of the torah: We learn to leyn, Tuesdays from 8 - 9 pm. Everybody who can already read Hebrew is welcome to join the class.

Dr. Annette M. Boeckler

The 3 week Leyning Course runs on Tuesdays from 24th June to 8th July at the Community Rooms. Email nlpjc@liberaljudaism.org for details.

And good news for those of you who were unable to attend this wonderful course: Rabbi Shulamit will be running an eleven week Leyning Course from January to March 2009.

NLPJC Members News

Mazel Tov!

A Conversion....

Marc Turner passed his Rabbinic Board on 15th May this year and was duly admitted to Judaism by Rabbi Shulamit on Saturday 17th May 2008.

A forthcoming wedding

Alison Behr and Marc Turner are delighted to announce that their wedding will take place on Sunday 1st March 2009. The chuppah will be at Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue and the ceremony will be conducted by Rabbis Shulamit Ambalu and Aaron Goldstein. Everyone is invited to come and celebrate this simcha with them.

A birth....

Megan Royle-Jacob and Torejan Havnen are pleased to announce the birth of their daughter, Madeline Jacob-Havnen on 17th May 2008 weighing 8lbs 10oz. Mum and baby are doing well.

And, of course, the 100 club winner....

...of the June draw was Sue Lukes (again!) who walks away with £24. We need more people to join in order to lessen Sue's chances each month!

In the event of the death of an NLPJC member, please contact the Funeral Directors Martin Broad & Son 020 8441 6047 and Rabbi Cliff Cohen on 020 7403 3779.

CHEDER CORNER

Our year is coming to an end, and I have been thinking a great deal about next year. Shulamit and I discussed next year before she went off on maternity leave. (Yeah Shulamit! Another little girl!) One idea we discussed was planning an outing for the Cheder next year. We wanted to get as many people as possible to the Yom Chinuch programme at LJS, but unfortunately it was cancelled. Next year we would like something more formalised. If there are any ideas floating about out there for good places to visit, please let me know. The Jewish Museum is one idea, but there must also be other venues that are good ones for Cheder students.

Outings for our community are not easy to organise, since they would have to be either outside of the normal Cheder hours or instead of a service for many parents, but we feel it would be a good experience for our Cheder.

For next year I would also like to do a serious year of mitzvot discussions with the Bar/Bat Mitzvah students. I will be looking into various possibilities over the summer, but I feel there is a need to separate the older students and the younger ones into different groups. This has arisen because of our work over the past few weeks (see

below) and the feeling that our older students need to be stretched more in their understanding of the difficult decisions that arise. How does traditional Judaism deal with difficulties? How do Progressive Liberal Jews feel? How does the individual student deal with the differences including their own views?

Lately we have been discussing ethical problems and looking at what the students' answers are and what the traditional Jewish answer might be. Example: If a person and a dog were both drowning and you had to choose one to save – which one would you save? (Pardon me a moment while I cover up my dog's ears for this conversation.) We look at the mitzvot the question brings up (It is a mitzvah both to save a life of a person and to prevent an animal from suffering.) and then decide what we would do under the circumstances. Then we look at the traditional Jewish answer. There has been some lively debate, to put it mildly.

As a part of this discussion, the older students will be

reading and commenting on parts of Liberal "position papers" printed on different issues. The first is on animals. Not just drowning ones, either...

Frances, our temporary Hebrew teacher, has been a wonderful addition, as she has been infusing Hebrew into all of our classroom activities. She is unfortunately going back to the States, but I have a sneaky plan to lock her in the "Albs and Sundry" closet so she can't leave. Please someone, find another Frances before September!

Another issue of the Cheder Newsletter will be coming out in the next two weeks, complete with photographs, since I have finally learned how to download them. In this community, teachers have to learn as much as the students!

Have a lovely summer.

Laura Miller
Head Teacher

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New LJ Officer

Our very own Jackie Richards was voted on to become an Officer of the Liberal Judaism Council at the LJ Council meeting in May 2008. She will not know her precise role until the next officers meeting, when they will be working out the strategy for the next three years.

Jackie is hoping to share experience gained from NLPJC with other communities. If you have any issues you wish Jackie to raise in the future, then please let her know.

We wish her good luck in her new role.

NLPJC 'Who's Who'

All officers and chair can be contacted at nlpjc@liberaljudaism.org or by post to PO Box 42702 London N19 5WR

Rabbi : Rabbi Shulamit Ambalu
Co-ordinator : Claire Helman
Hon. Secretary : Liz Reiner
Treasurer : Hannah Forbes
Prayers & Spirituality Chair : Alison Behr
Education Chair : Sue Lukes
Head & Cheder Teacher : Laura Miller
Children's & Adult's Hebrew Teacher : Rabbi Shulamit Ambalu
Volunteer Creche Worker : Anna Sklair
Administrator : Julia Chalfen
Fund-raising Coordinator : Sue Lukes
Social Action Co-ordinator : Daniel Casson
Marketing & Promotion : Claire Helman
Befriending Group : May Friedler & Sheila Melzak
Vacant Posts:
Membership Secretary; Youth; Intergenerational

If you are a member of NLPJC and are interested in joining one of the groups, or would like to fill one of the vacant roles, we would be delighted to hear from you.

NLPJC Newsletter is edited by Julia Chalfen. The deadline for the September/October issue is 20th August. Please send articles for publication to: nlpjc@liberaljudaism.org

Advertisements contained in the NLPJC Newsletter are the sole responsibility of the persons that post the advertisement. NLPJC does not make any guarantee as to the accuracy, completeness, truthfulness or reliability of such advertisements.

NLPJC events calendar

July - September 2008

Most events are held at *the Community Rooms adjacent to St. Mary's Church, Spensley Walk, Stoke Newington Church Street, London N16*, unless otherwise stated

<u>Date</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Venue</u>
Tuesdays 1 st , 8 th , 15 th July	7pm/8pm/9pm	Adult Education Programme	
Saturday 5 th July	10am / 10am 10.40am / 10.50am 11am	Torah Breakfast / Children's Hebrew Kol b'yachad service for children / cheder & creche Shabbat Service led by Student Rabbi Sandra Kviat	
Saturday 19 th July	10am / 10am 10.40am / 10.50am 11am	Torah Breakfast / Children's Hebrew Kol b'yachad service for children / cheder (<i>no crèche but toys available</i>) Shabbat Service led by Rabbi Hillel Athias-Robles	
Friday 25 th July	7.15pm / 8pm	Erev Shabbat Service / Supper & Speaker (to be announced)	
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Saturday 2 nd August	10am 11am	Torah Breakfast Shabbat Service led by Rabbi Cliff	
Saturday 16 th August	10am 11am	Torah Breakfast Shabbat Service led by Rabbi Cliff	
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Saturday 6 th Sept	10am / 10am 10.40am / 10.50am 11am	Torah Breakfast / Children's Hebrew (tbc) Kol b'yachad service for children / cheder & crèche (tbc) Shabbat Service led by Rabbi Cliff	
Sunday 14 th Sept	All day	Hackney Limmud. <i>See flyer insert for details / 020 8880 5607</i>	
Saturday 20 th Sept	10am / 10am 10.40am / 10.50am 11am	Torah Breakfast / Children's Hebrew Kol b'yachad service for children / cheder (<i>no creche but toys available</i>) Shabbat Service led by Rabbi Cliff	
Friday 26 th Sept	7.15pm / 8pm	Erev Shabbat Service / Supper & Speaker (to be announced)	
Monday 29 th Sept Tuesday 30 th Sept	7.30pm 10.30am / 1.30pm	Erev Rosh Hashanah Rosh Hashanah (with cheder & crèche) / Lunch	

Contact us at:

North London Progressive Jewish Community, PO Box 42702, London N19 5WR.

Call Rabbi Cliff Cohen on 020 7403 3779

email nlpjc@liberaljudaism.org or visit our website www.nlpjc.org.uk