

Report on the Jewish-Church of Scotland Dialogue speech— General Assembly 2022

Rabbi David Mason

I firstly would like to put on record my sincere thanks for inviting me to speak today at this eminent gathering, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. It has been an honour, a great honour to get to know leaders of the Kirk and take part in a most fruitful dialogue with you, in a mood of respect and desire for mutual understanding. I have been impressed and inspired at how you look to embrace and engage with vital issues that find themselves at the forefront of societies concerns, such as the environment, and wish you only success in these endeavours. I know that the Chief Rabbi, is passionate too, for our community to be relevant and engaged with such issues.

Being here is moving for me. I was brought up in Edinburgh. Attended school here. Made friendships here and will never forget the positive pride of being Scottish. Even though I have been an observant Jew for many years; as a child I would have two holy places – the Synagogue that I would attend weekly in Newington – and Tannadice Park, the home of my favourite football team Dundee United. In fact, football was so much a part of my young life, that when I was interviewed first for a position in Newtonmearns, Glasgow I compared the battle of the small family of Jews against the majority Syrian Greeks that characterises our Channuka story – as similar to Motherwell defeating Celtic. As you can imagine, half the community were happy and half were not!

But I remember also the strong connection between my Synagogue, Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation, and the Church. I remember visits of Moderators to the Synagogue. And I remember the Moderator speaking at the placing of a Holocaust memorial monument in Princes Street Gardens. So I always take pride in connecting my Scottish and Jewish identity – and so standing here today, in front of you seems so right.

But let us remember why I am here. Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis came here in 2014 to this General Assembly with words of friendship and harmony. He thanked you for the work you do in fighting antisemitism, and also in your engagement with vital issues that matter to society. The Chief Rabbi was in his first year in that august position – and he has continued to champion such important causes such as the protection of our climate and the plight of the Uighur Muslim population in Xingjang, China.

But of course, the context was a document, released in 2013 that had caused concern to the Jewish community. And Chief Rabbi Mirvis's response was not to run away from this deep challenge – but to engage in dialogue and conversation. And so for the last few years that dialogue has developed and grown. And I would like to put on record my thanks to all those within the Church leadership who never ceased to see the vital importance in this dialogue. I have gained friends in the Church of Scotland through this dialogue – and have only grown in my affection for the Church.

Additionally, I would also like to show my appreciation for the Jewish community in Scotland, and the Board of Deputies of British Jews for their constant support. Their support has been vital for its success.

Now we have a famous saying in Judaism – 2 Jews, 3 Opinions. Another way of saying this is referring to the Jewish person who is washed up on a desert island and is asked for his first wish as to what should be placed there for him. He says – 2 Synagogues? 2 Synagogues – why, he is asked. Well, I need the Synagogue I attend, and the Synagogue I don't attend. Jewish people are an argumentative lot – in fact, according to our Midrashic texts, 'argument' was created when God separated between the upper and lower waters in creation. In essence, arguing, taking different approaches, is part of our human DNA. And I hesitate to say that I remember growing up in this amazing country, Scotland, that we were also an argumentative lot. And that can also be represented within the Church's Presbyterian structure that has always pushed back against leaving power in the hands of the few.

So dialogue between our communities has, as you can imagine been a challenge. But in the development of a glossary of terms, I think we have, together created a path of great hope for the future relationship between the Church and the Jewish community.

This glossary has done two things. Firstly it has deepened mutual understanding surrounding the very terms that can cause discord. Secondly, it has offered up vocabulary, wording, and understanding for both our communities that can ensure that in expressing passionate opinions, we do not offend each other. It will, as Chief Rabbi Mirvis mentioned 8 years ago, ensure that we have the facts, before we make a stand. Harmony does not here mean that we will agree. It means that we will disagree well. We will take different approaches based on our contexts and subjective experiences – while being scrupulous in ensuring that the other is not offended.

My friend, the Very Revd Dr Susan Brown puts this so well in her introductory reflections to the glossary when she states that ‘even those who speak the same language can find that language separating them’.

We are not looking to write exhaustive tracts of theology on the terms that we have chosen – rather to reflect on how they are heard by each of us. There is still more work to be done on this glossary – but you can see already in the work we have done on the term People of Israel, what potential the glossary has. It can outline how each of our traditions understands this term. It can pick out the divergence essential to those understandings. And it can frame how we both relate to this divergence. There is no attempt to change the other. Just to understand the other in a deeper way.

I want to end by referring to my great-grandfather. My name David Emanuel was after him – he was called Emanuel Mayersohn and he was a Rabbi in the German town of Rastatt. He died in 1924, thankfully before the deluge of the Holocaust. But I learned from his daughter, my great Auntie, that he would go walking in the hills of the Black Forest each Sunday afternoon with local parish Ministers. These bonds of friendship were so important to my great-grandfather. And they inspired me in the work I do.

And so I leave you with my friendship and warmth and that of my Chief Rabbi. And the blessing we read in the Book of Numbers:

May the Lord bless you and keep you

May the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord turn his face to you and grant you peace.

Thank you.