

Address by Isaac Garson at the Oxford Synagogue,
Shabbat Sept 2nd 2019

A warm welcome to you all here today and especially to Jesmond's 3 children, Sheni, David and Rebecca.

Although I consider Jesmond and Lizzie personal friends, I am touched and deeply honoured to have been asked by Lizzie to address you today when so many other people here could have done a similar, if not a much better job. Thank you, Lizzie.

The position of Head of the Chevrah Kaddishah is one of the most important any Jewish community can bestow on an individual; that role needs to be in the hands of someone with some very special qualities.

I appreciate that today we are marking Jesmond's stepping down as our Head of the Chevrah Kaddishah but your attendance here is testament to the gratitude we all feel for Jesmond's contribution in that role over many years. The service he has provided to members and families of OJC members has been incalculable. Wise, patient, meticulously organised and above all, sensitive and tactful at times of great sadness and distress, Jesmond has fitted the role perfectly.

Jesmond, together with Lionel Wollenberg and the late Wilfred Faust, set about reorganising the Chevrah Kaddishah around 1996. Jesmond has since been instrumental in refining the process further into the efficient machine that it is today.

Funeral directors, stonemasons and the US's Taharah volunteer committee have all expressed their gratitude for Jesmond's efficiency and tact in all their dealings with them over many years.

Jesmond, we thank you most sincerely for your commitment and dedication to this enormous Mitzvah.

Mike Ward has now taken over from Jesmond and Michael, I'm sure you will acknowledge you have a hard act to follow!

Now, it's never too late for a lesson on the OJC's history. I know you probably cannot wait to move on to Kiddush but on this very significant day I ask you to hold on a little longer because it is wholly appropriate to remind ourselves of Jesmond's enormous impact on the history of this community.

The challenges we continue to face in encouraging members to help this community run smoothly is nothing new, but when there was ever a need bridge the gap in any aspect of the community's needs you could always count on Jesmond to step up when asked or even to seize the initiative himself. As Jesmond and many others have demonstrated over decades, being "time-poor" is not a good enough reason for avoiding responsibility.

Towards the end of the 90's, we started discussing the possibility of building extensions to the centre and Jesmond joined the Building Committee to help create this wonderful centre which was eventually completed in 2004.

I have had the privilege of working closely with Jesmond in a variety of capacities but principally in the celebration of our 150 and 175 years respectively of a Jewish presence in Oxford. I can tell you that his project leadership and meticulous quest for detail would put most of us in the shade.

We should also recognise Jesmond's abilities as a trailblazer firstly in respect of helping to set up the Playshul in the Centre, overcoming a number of logistical challenges and by ensuring the provision the resources to make it happen. This was no mean feat but through Jesmond's soft persuasion and grit-like determination in the face of considerable opposition, the Playshul was finally moved from St

Barnabas to the Youth Hall where it was run by Lizzie over many years and from where it still operates today.

Secondly, this ability would include the setting up of the Masorti services that have now been institutionalised to run monthly. Jesmond has regularly lehned and davened both in Masorti and in Orthodox services a skill that he has always achieved to his usual high standards.

Before Masorti, let us not forget either that Jesmond was also part of the Religious Services Committee in the 90's that later became the Orthodox Services Committee. Keeping all congregants happy in our services is no easy task but Jesmond always addressed any important issues with his usual sensitivity and tact.

Also in the 90's, Jesmond took over as President of the OJC Council and led it through some truly difficult times with the wisdom of a Solomon. But who was it during that time who discussed with John Dunston the possibility of an OJC choir? Jesmond! And we all know what a popular initiative that has become.

In response to an identified need to engage on Jewish matters with the wider community, who was the instigator of the rich and varied Mosaic programme we see today? Jesmond!

Who brought together the contributors to create the inclusive and highly-praised Yizkor service and booklet we follow today for Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot and Kippur? Jesmond!

Jesmond, the beautiful, clear and sensitive way you have led us through so many Yizkor services will remain long in the memory.

Whose idea was it to introduce a Children's Blessing at the end of our services? Jesmond's!

We all know that Jonathan Morris is the 'go-to' today when families need to start considering bar- or bat-mitsvah options and on how to mark and celebrate the occasion. But who took on this task and developed it into what it is today? Jesmond!

Let me remind you too that Jesmond spent some time editing the newsletter that has become the eBulletins, at a time when someone was required to take it over.

On Rosh Hashanah 2006, Evie Kemp delivered an address challenging the community to raise the profile of Oxford's Jewish History. In response, and further prompted by Cecil Roth's book *The Jews of Medieval Oxford* published in 1951, the Heritage Committee was set up. Evie was joined by José Patterson, Debbie Sandler, Victoria Bentata.....and Jesmond. Since then, the original committee members have been supported and joined by several historians in this field and more recently saw the development of an enormously rich and growing website.

Almost immediately after joining the committee, Jesmond set about communicating with colleges to request their help on collecting data on Oxford Hebraica. The importance of that data – which heavily informed the creation of the website – cannot be overestimated. 16 years after its inception, and whilst some committee members have stood down, Jesmond still sits on that committee.

Jesmond is a wonderful, moving orator as evidenced by the eulogies he has delivered at some of our most heart-breaking Oxford funerals.

Jesmond has been a central figure in the character of this community for over 35 years stressing the importance of our inclusivity at all times.

Whilst recognising that I have probably not done full justice in this summary to Jesmond's fuller contribution to the OJC, I wish to conclude, therefore, by referring back again to 2009, when Jesmond

was invited to deliver the Joan Goodman Memorial Lecture at Norwich Synagogue. He themed his address on the opening lines of Psalm 133...

**הִנֵּה מַה-טוֹב וַיְמַה-נְּעִים, שְׁבֹת אֶחָיִם גַּם-יַחַד.
“Behold! How good and how pleasant it is when brothers
dwell together in unity”**

...and focussed on Oxford’s experience in building an inclusive Jewish community. It is something I have read more than a few times over the last few years and with Jesmond’s permission we are hoping to republish it in a forthcoming Menorah.

We also recognise that Lizzie’s solid support has helped to make all this possible and our thanks must extend to her as well today. Thank you, Lizzie.

Jesmond, none of us doubt that you have become our עֲמוּד קְהֵלָה, our pillar of the community. Whilst we are here today to mark your retirement as תְּשׁ of the Chevrah Kaddishah, no one should ever underestimate how you have shaped our community in so many diverse ways over the last 35 years.

Dear Jesmond, our appreciation of what you have done for us knows no bounds and on behalf of the whole community, I thank you again and wish you many, many more years amongst us.