



## Antisemitism row has not soured my experience

In 2016, Oxford Labour Club was rocked by allegations of antisemitism. Three years on, the group is transformed in a way that the national Labour Party might learn from, says **Nina Morris-Evans**

In 2016, I was on a gap year before my arrival in Oxford. The news was awash with tales of antisemitism in Oxford Labour Club (OULC) and beyond.

These allegations emerged after some members were revealed to have discussed Zionists rigging British elections, frequently used the term 'Zio' and said attacks on Jews in Europe were justified by Israel's stance over Gaza. The club's (non-Jewish) co-chair Alex Chalmers resigned in disgust at the allegations. In his resignation statement he said, 'A large proportion of both OULC and the student left in Oxford more generally have some kind of problem with Jews.'

The affair led to the Labour Party's national student organisation conducting an inquiry. Baroness Royall, who led the inquiry, concluded that there had been incidents of antisemitic behaviour and that 'language that would once have been intolerable is now tolerated' in the club.

Two students were eventually cleared by the Labour NEC's disputes committee of being antisemitic, but it was recommended that the party issue warnings to both over

their conduct. This recommendation was ignored, provoking a furious response from Jewish organisations.

While this was unfolding, I was becoming involved in my constituency Labour party in north London. I became youth representative and even ran events with Jeremy Corbyn. Unfortunately those students who were creating an antisemitic atmosphere in the OULC are now prominent in the wider Labour Party. Some of them have been key figures in setting up Momentum, while others are vocal Corbynites with some political clout.

Three years on, the OULC has a new composition of students. Over that time it has been at pains to undo its antisemitic reputation. I did not get involved in the Party at Oxford, but I'm aware from those that are that although

some of Labour's current antisemitism problems started in Oxford, the OULC has done far better than the Party as a whole at apologising and recovering its reputation as an inclusive space that is welcoming to Jewish members.

Antisemitism is not part of my Oxford experience. Most of my non-Jewish friends have come with me to Jewish Society (JSoc) events. I have never heard of BDS motions getting anywhere, although they were a huge feature of student politics in 2014. The Jewish student experience ranges from college to college. For example, this year there was a motion in Somerville to abolish kosher meat. But it didn't get anywhere and the issue was resolved by swift mediation with the JSoc. This is how similar sensitive issues have been dealt with recently. However, I am not visibly Jewish and I can't pretend to know what the experiences of someone who wears a kippah around town might be.

I do know that the Oxford vigil at Radcliffe Square, following the massacre at Pittsburgh synagogue in America last October, was heaving with equal numbers of Jews and people of other and no faiths.

I hope that when a young person decides to go to university,



antisemitism is not what they will be worrying about and they will be focusing on other decisions about their Jewish life. Will they seek out the Jewish community, and how involved do they want to be? Whatever decision they make, Oxford JSoc will support them. Although I may be biased – I was president of the Society last term – I believe that Oxford JSoc is special.

One factor in this is the role played by the Oxford Jewish Community (OJC), based at Oxford Synagogue on Richmond Road. It is the only synagogue in the country that is not affiliated to any denomination.

People from different backgrounds come together to celebrate festivals, such as Shavuot in June, when the local Jewish community and student body put together a programme of all-night study, with sessions led by guests, community members and students. Later, we ate cheesecake that had been made at a chaplaincy-run baking and dinner event. The conversations and discussions flowed into the night until shacharit (morning prayers) at dawn. Students conversed with elderly members of the Oxford community and Liberal with Orthodox.

Every week of term there is an Orthodox and Progressive service at the synagogue. Afterwards up to 100 more students join them for a kosher dinner, cooked by the OJC chef, Joanne. She also cooks a cheap and tasty kosher meat or vegetarian dinner every weeknight and is very popular among students, caring for us all in an almost motherly capacity. For the Friday night dinner on my 21st birthday, she had baked a huge chocolate cake to feed 120 people.

On Shabbat, students often stay at the OJC all day, playing games, eating lunch and seudah shlishit (an additional Shabbat meal), and learning from each other at the student-led 'Pirkei Avot' study session.

The Oxford JSoc also runs events, ranging from picnics to pub trips to interfaith baking. My favourite activity is the annual Ramadan Iftar, the celebration ending the Ramadan fast, where hundreds of Muslims, Christians and Jews come together in a college dining room to break the fast and share stories and traditions.

I come from a progressive, left-wing background, and yet I have been enormously welcomed into the JSoc by Orthodox chaplains. And I have handed over the baton of JSoc president to the society's first black president, who finished his conversion process this summer.

My experiences running the synagogue's egalitarian service and being involved in the community have shaped my Jewish journey. I am proud of the Jewish community in Oxford. Its structure and practice are examples that should be followed by other communities and Jsocs across the country. ■

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## Ancient music lives again in Im Freyghish

Oxford composer Jeremy Arden has written a composition drawing on an ancient religious scale. **Rebecca Taylor** spoke to him about the inspiration for his work



When Jeremy Arden began researching the sounds of klezmer music he found that the genre drew on a scale that stretched back to use in ancient religious services. Now he is using this distinctive sound for his own composition, *Im Freyghish*, which will be performed in Oxford this winter.

**REBECCA TAYLOR: What does 'Im Freyghish' mean?**

**JEREMY ARDEN:** The 'freyghish' mode is an ancient cantorial mode, also known as the Ahavah Rabbah mode, the Mode of Supplication, and the Altered Phrygian mode.

I was fascinated that these ancient scales had found their way out of the synagogue and into secular klezmer music. The 'freyghish' is perhaps the most distinctive, not least because its name translates as 'Abounding Love', from the words of prayer in the Shabbat morning service. This scale, which some say has come to us from the time of King David, is the basis for klezmer all over the world. It has a beautiful sound, a kaleidoscope of minor and major notes with a Gypsy resonance. It is also a nine-note scale (rather than the normal seven), which throws a shot of dissonance into the mix.

**RT: Tell us about the piece you wrote using this special scale.**

**JA:** I'm not observant but I love the synagogue and its community, especially its cultural programme. I wanted to write something to commemorate the 175th anniversary of the founding of Oxford Synagogue,

**Leo Appel (1st violin), Elena Kenyon-Gewirtz (2nd violin), Tabitha Appel (viola), Rachel Appel (cello); Jeremy (Jay) Arden is at the front**

which was marked in 2017. Several of our young members are brilliant musicians and it was clear that three members of the Appel family (Leo, Tabitha and Rachel) and their friend Elana Kenyon-Gewirtz would make a wonderful string quartet. My composition has four movements, each based on elemental themes: earth, air, fire and water, which, for me, contain all of Jewish history and culture. *Im Freyghish* contains many echoes from the past projected in my contemporary musical voice.

Our ensemble performed the first two movements of *Im Freyghish* at Oxford Synagogue's anniversary event and at the launch of Rebecca Abrams's book, *The Jewish Journey* (p14). Now the remaining parts are complete, the whole piece will be performed for the first time in December in Oxford's Holywell Music Room.

**RT: Have you used Jewish music in your work before?**

**JA:** This is the first time I've drawn on Jewish traditions in my music. It has been a way of connecting to my heritage. I'm writing a new composition for piano based on the same mode and I'm delighted at how the scale keeps on giving new forms. ■

*Im Freyghish* will perform 'Im Freyghish' by Jeremy Arden on 19 December at 7.30pm at the Holywell Music Room. Contact: arden@virginmedia.com