

“We even have a prayer to celebrate a PhD”

Oxford has an inclusive synagogue and an energetic Jewish cultural life. **Rebecca Taylor** speaks to the activists, academics and students who make up this dynamic community. Photography **Rob Greig**



PETER STRAUSS

Student, Oxford Brookes University

‘I’m a second-year computer science student. I grew up in north London and am active in organisations such as Yachad (which campaigns for Israeli-Palestinian peace) and the Zemel Choir, which sings traditional Jewish music.

Last year I was the vice-president of Oxford JSoc and this year I’m president of the Oxford Brookes JSoc, which is small but has a lot of interaction with Oxford JSoc. A big issue is getting bodies, such as the Oxford Union, to refuse speakers who have made antisemitic comments. At Oxford Brookes things feel less polarised than at Oxford University – we have had no BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanction) motions proposed.

The Oxford Jewish Community (OJC) at Oxford Synagogue offers students kosher meals all week. Eating together creates a real hub. Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of British Palestine, once called Oxford the “city of books”, and that encapsulates the connection between Jews and the city. I feel very comfortable here and have not experienced antisemitism, although I have heard from others who have.’ See: su.jsoc@brookes.ac.uk and *Oxford Brookes JSoc on FaceBook*.



RAHIMA KENNER

Artist

‘I am a printmaker, making etchings onto copper plates and painterly monoprints. I teach etching at Oxford Printmakers and exhibit with them and around the country. Last spring my etchings, *Birds*, were exhibited at Zikit Studio near Rehovot, Israel. This autumn I’m running print workshops at the University Natural History Museum. Although my subject matter is not explicitly Jewish, I see my art and religious practice as expressions of the same spiritual perspective, where love is informed by knowledge, and knowledge by



ISAAC GARSON

Artist

‘I was born in Gibraltar, where I was brought up in an Orthodox Sephardi family. My mother was born in Portugal and my father was a Gibraltar businessman who was an unpaid chazzan [cantor] at one of the four synagogues.

I joined the OJC in 1976, after I arrived for a teaching post in an Oxfordshire secondary school. I retired in 2008 to set up Lunch4Learning, a charity in Uganda.

I was a member of the OJC council for 10 years. I run the Orthodox Services Committee and regularly lead services and read from the Torah. I also sit on the Chevra Kadishah [group that performs burial rites] and on the Ben Gurion University scholarship-working group.

My wife and I keep kosher and light candles on Friday night and on festivals. Being Jewish in Oxford is not easy: to keep kashrut one has to make an effort but we love it here and would not move anywhere else. I took up glassmaking after I retired and mostly make Judaica: mezuzot, challah plates, Seder plates and candleholders. I have recently started to combine glass with silver to make jewellery.’

a love of beauty.

I was raised in Edgware, London, and moved to Oxford as a young adult. My father transmitted his love of Jewish history and archaeology, often via lively Bible quizzes for us children. At OJC there are a kind and tolerant range of people who are interested in life and learning. I attend services regularly but intermittently and occasionally do a few verses at the women’s or Masorti services. The OJC’s social activities, such as assistance for refugees, are also important.’ rahimakenner.com



JO SANDELSON

Cartoonist

‘I grew up in London and moved to Oxford in 2003. I go to the Orthodox services at OJC (my husband is Orthodox), but am only moderately observant.

I go to Judaism classes run by the OJC on Sunday mornings and volunteer to speak about my religion to visiting school groups. We have become closer to the community since our son’s barmitzvah last year and the death of my father.

I’m comfortable being Jewish in Oxford. In our street, I’ve discovered other families with some Jewish heritage. However, our mezuzah disappeared two years ago from the front door and I have heard my share of antisemitic comments. We play down our religion in public – my

husband and son only put on kippot for prayers.

At the OJC, when Leonard Cohen died, we sang “Yigdal” [a prayer] to the tune of “Hallelujah”. The OJC also has its own Hebrew prayer to celebrate the awarding of a PhD! Chief Rabbi Mirvis visited us and was reported to have said, “Too much community, not enough prayer.” I don’t agree. To me community is intrinsic to Jewish life.

I’m working on a cartoon for a national newspaper about being part of a minority culture. There is a need for discussion about what it means to be Jewish. If I can make even a small difference, it’ll be worth it.’ josandelson.com



SUE DORAN

Professor of Early Modern British History at the University of Oxford, Senior Research Fellow at St Benet’s Hall and Jesus College

‘I was born in London, and my sister and I went to South Tottenham [Orthodox] synagogue every Saturday and High Holy Days with my grandmother. My father was involved in groups such as AJEX (Association of Jewish Ex-servicemen).

My husband and I, with others, founded the Masorti group, which holds monthly services. I am on the chaplaincy and Oxford WIZO committees. Although I am not observant nor a believer, we keep Friday nights, make challah, and run a semi-kosher home.

I offer students a tutorial on Jews in early modern Europe and a class on toleration and persecution, which includes a strand focusing on Jews.

I tend to look after the Jewish students at St Benet’s Hall and with other Jewish fellows there advise on intercommunal matters. At Jesus College I have been asked for advice on JCR plans to have a Gaza student scholarship (it was modified to a scholarship for a student affected by war), and recently how to celebrate a Jewish holiday at a diversity dinner.

There is an annual inter-communal walk, from the OJC to the main city mosque, where we eat food provided by the different communities. But the pro-Palestinian groups are very active in the city. The antisemitism in the Oxford University Labour Club a few years ago aroused concerns among Jewish students. I was told of two antisemitic incidents targeted at students, but those students who sit on the chaplaincy committee do not report any threatening behaviour.’



ALISON RYDE

President, Oxford Jewish Community

‘I grew up in Bradford, where we were members of the Orthodox community. I moved to Oxford in 1992. A key attraction was the OJC. After a few weeks we recognised we could make a Jewish life away from London. I helped revive a pre-cheder activities group called Playshul, and with other mums, managed children’s services. Our four children attended cheder and Jewish summer camps, and had bar- and batmitzvahs. The challenge faced by OJC children on leaving Oxford is that we are a uniquely tolerant community, and other congregations may be less welcoming. OJC runs busy education and interfaith programmes, and encounters little antisemitism. We have no rabbi and our members conduct services. On one Shabbat a month we run Liberal and Masorti services alongside our regular Orthodox services. There are also occasional women’s services. We all come together afterwards for kiddush. I’m proud to represent such an open-minded community.’ ojc-online.org

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