

## **Is the *Tanakh* still relevant to the formation of Jewish identity?**

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I delivered this lecture in response to a question: 'Is the *Tanakh* still relevant to the formation of Jewish identity?'. I did not, however, aim to unpack the word 'still'; the relationship between the Bible and Jewish identity is and has always been complex. The relationship is also context-dependent; Israel is different than Diaspora. I focused on present-day England, noting that it may or may not be useful to extrapolate to other parts of Europe. My presentation was not historical, sociological or anthropological. I described and annotated my own experience as a Bible scholar and an active participant in the Anglo-Jewish community.

I emphasised that my qualifications to address this subject are purely experiential. They include a PhD on the dreams of Genesis, Cambridge University, 1996; and a period teaching Hebrew Bible at Cambridge University, 1997-2006, and King's College London, 2007-2011. In addition, I was Part-time lecturer in Bible at Leo Baeck College, a Liberal and Reform rabbinical seminary, 1997-2006. I established MA in Jewish Studies at King's in partnership with Leo Baeck College and with London School of Jewish Studies (LSJS), 2009, and helped to rebuild an MA in Biblical Studies. I was co-programme director, Cambridge Day Limmud, 2007, 2009, and an occasional speaker in many Jewish community contexts, from Liberal through Masorti to Orthodox synagogues, Limmud Day conferences, Jewish Historical Society, and University Jewish Student Societies. I was a community leader and the head teacher of cheder at Beth Shalom Reform Synagogue, Cambridge, 1992-2008. In 2009 I moved to Lauderdale Road Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, London, where I gave *divrei Torah* after shabbat morning *kiddush*, and led women's study sessions, 2009-2011. Nine years spent in the USA (1982-1991) gave comparative perspective. My move to Israel in 2011 gave distance.

My lecture covered the following topics: Jews and the King James Bible; the Bible and inter-faith relations: the Bible and Jewish inter-denominational relations; Jews and the Bible in the university; the Bible in the synagogue; and Gender and the Bible; the Bible and Israel. My final answer to the question, 'Is the Bible still relevant to the formation of Jewish identity?' concentrated on three areas of interest: (1) The Bible as a source of and authority for halakha which forms identity through conviction and behavior. (2) the role of Biblical narratives in forming identity: (3) the extent to which Identity is often expressed in negatives: I am what I am not: (i) In faith communities, Jews are not Christians because they read the Bible in Hebrew (or know that they should) and, in some cases, through commentaries. (ii) In interfaith dialogue, Jews are not Christians and Muslims because the Bible, not the NT or Koran, is their sacred text. (iii) In universities Jews are not Christians because they are professors of Hebrew Bible not of Old Testament. (iv) In inter-denominational contexts, 'progressive' Jews are not Orthodox Jews because they read historical criticism, archaeology, Ancient Near Eastern parallels etc; Orthodox Jews are not 'progressive' because they do not. My final answer to the question was: It's complicated!