

Saturday 5th November 2011

SHABBAT LECH LECHA 5772 – LEO BAECK COLLEGE SHABBAT

Sermon delivered by Rabbi Michael Hilton , of Kol Chai Hatch End Jewish Community, at Shaarei Tzedek North London Reform Synagogue

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It is a very special privilege and a pleasure to have been invited to Shaarei Tzedek to speak about Leo Baeck College this morning. I am only too aware that you have more reason here to know about the recent changes in leadership at the College than other congregations, with one of your rabbinic team, Rabbi Dr Deborah Kahn Harris being appointed as the new Principal of the College, and another (Rabbi Marcia Plumb) leaving for Boston to accompany Rabbi Dr Michael Shire to Hebrew College, on his departure from Leo Baeck. Your Senior Rabbi (Colin Eimer) has taught at the College for many years, and I met and shared time with your Chair of Council, Linda Cooke, at the superbly run College Summer Institute in July. So you are already well aware of the great programmes the college puts on for all of us, the skilled rabbis it trains and the talented new Principal which it has. What can I add on this Shabbat *Lech Lecha*, when students and faculty go out to talk about the college around the communities?

Over the past year, as a member of the faculty and as part of its strategic view, I have found out a great deal about the inner workings of the college. Rather to my surprise, I have discovered that its future is by no means assured. Training Rabbis in London in a small college always has been and always will be fabulously expensive. Classes are small and that costs a lot, but there is far more to it than just putting on a class. There are degrees which have to be validated and up to standard. Lecturers have to have proper training and well designed courses, students from overseas have to have visas (which they can only get these days for a properly run college), courses have to be properly assessed and have university standard quality control. It is always going to cost Reform and Liberal Jews in this country a huge amount of money and so it is not surprising that there are those who ask – is it worth it?

Make no mistake about it, if we didn't have the college here within a generation we would have very few rabbis. We are in a world with an international market and people think globally. I teach Pastoral Care and Community Skills to the final year students and spend more time with them than anyone else does. I know what they are thinking. Recently a huge proportion have been students from Europe – from Russia and Eastern Europe, from Scandinavia, from Hungary, from Italy from Germany. Most of them would like to have at least part of the career working here in the UK. That is a huge tribute to the college and our congregations where they have been trained. But if they and potential rabbis from here went to train in the USA, the situation would be reversed. We would soon have a brain drain.

The other half of the college, and equally important, is the Department for Jewish Education, which trains our cheder teachers, supports our religion schools and community education programmes, and much more besides. It is absolutely clear to me that JCOSS, the wonderful new Jewish secondary school you are so lucky to have down the road, JCOSS would not exist today without the detailed research and planning the College was able to provide. For some years now that brilliant Department, which has done so much for all our congregations and rabbis, has been very under-funded. Some have argued that it might be better to buy education services piecemeal as required. If that change were to take place, we would no longer have a Department of Education: what would be left would be not a Department but an Agency, with a temporary staff supplying services purchased by congregations but without the freedom to initiate projects big or small. I feel this very personally having spent a considerable amount of time leading one of the Department's projects, "Partners in Leadership" dedicated to building better working relationships between congregational leaders and their rabbis.

One practical step we can all take this weekend is to sign up as a Friend of the College. It's a great little scheme which would cost each of us just £8 a month. If everyone involved and interested in education signed up, it would do a lot to ensure the college's future.

On Shabbat *Lech Lecha* we begin the story of Abraham. Our tradition regards him as the father not of one faith, but of three, of Judaism Islam and Christianity. The way the rabbis of old looked at this is probably not quite the way we would look at it today. Ishmael, the son who is sent away, became the ancestor of nomadic tribes, and thus (according to later rabbinic tradition) of the Arab people and Muslims. One of Jacob's sons, Esau, also rejected, became the ancestor of Edom and thus, according to the Rabbis of Rome and the Christians. Now we tend to think of Islam and Christianity as offshoots of our more ancient religion, so it's often struck me as strange that Ishmael and Esau were both the older of two brothers, and I have often wondered if there is some particular significance in this. I like to think that our teachers who gave us this *midrash* were trying to say to our Christian and Muslim friends – do not think of us Jews as older, do not regard us as some museum piece left over from ancient times – we are still a young religion. I once developed these thoughts into a lecture I gave entitled "Judaism: A Young Religion" at the Jewish Christian Bible week in Germany, yet another initiative of Leo Baeck College, which has played such an invaluable part over so many years in interfaith work in the UK and Europe. I like to think that the college chose *Lech Lecha* as Leo Baeck College shabbat not just so the students could go forth to the congregations, but so as to emphasise this point as we read the story of Abraham—three faiths, not one, invoke his name as a founding father and through its interfaith work our college enables us all, as rabbis, as teachers as members of congregations to build our own relationships with our neighbours and to help, as the college ordination certificate states, to build peace in the world.