

Edinburgh Jewish Literary Society

President's Report: 2005-2006 Season

The Lit had a variety of talks in its 118th year. It opened with the expert on ancient Jewish law **Professor Bernard Jackson** from the University of Manchester, who spoke on "History and Authority in the Halakah: the Problem of the Agunah." He told us of the history of the problem of women "chained" to their husbands who refuse to grant them a get. To date no satisfactory solution has been found to this problem which continues to plague Haredi communities, but part of the solution may come from the history surrounding talmudic and mediaeval decisions.

The second speaker was **Jenni Calder**, the daughter of the late David Daiches, son of Rabbi Daiches. A prolific scholar of Scottish literature and culture, David Daiches also wrote of his childhood experiences in Edinburgh and its Jewish community. His daughter and granddaughter, Gowan Calder, a playwright and actress, read selections from David Daiches's works.

Susannah Heschel gave the third talk, on "Abraham Geiger: the rabbi as historian." Professor Heschel was visiting the University of Edinburgh on sabbatical leave from Dartmouth College in the United States. Abraham Geiger, she told us, was her favourite Jewish thinker. She expounded on his thoughts, controversial in their time both to Christians and Orthodox Jews, but many have since been embraced by religious scholars for their penetrating depth.

Nathan Abrams, a new Lecturer at the University of Aberdeen, entertained the Lit with film excerpts in his talk on "The Jewish Dream Factory: Jews and the American film industry." He accompanied the excerpts with his own analysis of the presence of Jews in the American film and television business.

The second half of the season began with a talk by **Catherine Lockerbie**, the Director of the Edinburgh Book Festival. An avid enthusiast of Israeli writers, she described the joys and tribulations of bringing writers from small countries like Israel to the Book Festival.

Ross Bradshaw spoke next about the little documented case of "Jews in the Spanish Civil War." Viewed as a precursor to the fascism that was to devastate Europe a few years later, a hugely disproportionate number of Jews headed for what they viewed as the frontline against the rise of the fascists.

This year, the Lit sponsored an event for Edinburgh's International Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace. **Professor Gary Gilbert**, on leave at Oxford University from Claremont McKenna College in the United States, spoke about the ancient Jewish diasporah caught "Between assimilation and

difference: aspects of Jewish identity in the ancient world."

The following talk was by **Dr Colin Shindler** from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London who spoke on "The triumph of military Zionism: nationalism and the origins of the Israeli right." He discussed the obscure history of the current and recent Israeli right, including Menachem Begin's refashioning of the image of Jabotinsky after himself.

The Lit concluded its season of events with much merriment on the occasion of the Purim season, with klesmer music by "**Beyond the Pale**" and the reading of a Yiddish play.

This year the Lit introduced a few novelties to its operations. Teams were organised to serve as contacts to potential speakers, reporting back to a Coordinating Secretary to finalise arrangements. A rotating chair was also introduced for the meetings, usually the host acting as chair when not the President. The re-organisation appears to have been a success.

Avery Meiksin, President
Edinburgh Jewish Literary Society
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