

# Conference of European Rabbis

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OPINION

## Opinion: Do Jews have a future in Europe?

Seventy-five years after Auschwitz was liberated, Jews in Europe are facing new challenges. The continent must become safe again, says guest author Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis.



Seventy-six years have passed since a cattle train brought Jacob and Mariam Schwartz, my great-grandparents, from Hungary to Auschwitz-Birkenau. On a clear summer's day in May, hungry and thirsty, scared and soiled from a three-day train ride, they were sent to the gas chambers and cremated. Dozens of members of my mother's family from Hungary, men, women and children, were amongst the 400,000 Hungarian Jews who were murdered in Auschwitz.





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One year later, the Auschwitz Concentration Camp was liberated by the Red Army, but very few survivors were found: Almost all of the inmates had been eliminated through the gas chambers, disease and death marches.

As a Jewish leader, this is not just a history lesson. The people around me – those who pray in my synagogue, gather for a social occasion, celebrate a bar mitzvah or mourn a family member – are the relatives of people like Jacob and Mariam. Today's European Jewish community is shaped by the Holocaust.

At the end of WWII, a large proportion of Holocaust survivors felt that there was no Jewish future in Europe. The majority emigrated to Palestine to be a part of the new Jewish State, where Jews would always be welcome. Others emigrated to the Americas, with only a minority remaining in Europe, holding on to the belief that they could rebuild a Jewish future.



Auschwitz symbolizes the atrocities of the Holocaust like almost no other site

## European hopes

For almost half a century Europe was divided between the Eastern Bloc and Western Europe, with an





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Iron Curtain dividing the continent and its Jews. In most Western European countries, Jewish life was rekindled with survivors and newcomers; in Eastern Europe, the only functioning Jewish community existed in Romania, thanks to the skills of its chief rabbi, Moses Rosen, who was able to make a deal with the communist regime and secure freedom of worship and freedom of emigration for his community.

Whilst the decision to stay in Europe was an individual one, based on personal circumstances, for many Jews the hope of a better future in Europe was anchored in the new structures and values being developed in Europe, ensuring a future without wars, pogroms and anti-Semitism. What went on to become the European Union was founded as an economic union with the central aim of ending the constant state of war and competition between the major powers.

The European Union, according to former European Commission President Roman Prodi, was an assembly of minorities, which helped Europe's Jews to take part in this process, not as outsiders, but as fully fledged citizens of Europe.

[Read more: Jewish life in New York: 'You've got to watch your back'](#)



Pinchas Goldschmidt serves at the Choral Synagogue in Moscow





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## Rising anti-Semitism

However, today, the reality is that the European project has not delivered on all its goals. We are as aware of anti-Semitism today as we have ever been. Fifteen years ago, terrorism hit Europe and specifically European Jews; attacks in many European countries went almost unnoticed. Since that time, **anti-Semitism has been progressively more present** on three fronts: the far right, the far left and through religious fundamentalism.

Sadly, the Jews of Europe have had to ask themselves yet again if there is a future on the continent. Years after the initial attacks on Jewish sites, after Islamic terrorists targeted the European pillars of culture and journalism with the attacks on Charlie Hebdo and a Paris concert hall, Europe finally responded by uniting and coordinating security structures, returning security to the streets of Europe. Even then, some European states responded by legislating against minority religions. Jewish practices such as religious slaughter and circumcision became the collateral damage, posing further questions for the Jews of Europe.

We all agree that Europe must once again become a safe space. This is a problem not only for the Jews of Europe, but for Europe itself. The Jewish future of Europe will depend on whether Europe will be able to strengthen its security and its common identity to continue to be a place for people of all faiths and none. For more than 1,700 years the Jewish community has been an integral part of Europe's history; Europe has always benefited from it. Our mission is clear: We want to build a future together because we are here to stay. We hope that we will be able to.

<https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-do-jews-have-a-future-in-europe/a-52154607>





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► **Further** to last week's Letters to the Editor on the liberation of Auschwitz and Britain's refusal to acknowledge Hitler's parallel war against Jews by taking even the slightest step to hinder the efficient operation of Auschwitz, I remember the correspondence between my Jaffa-born mother and her sisters in Tel Aviv, where they moved as the city was being built.

In those days of incredible postal delivery, their airmail letters flew backwards and forwards like migrating birds. When Israel's War of Independence was finally over, my mother read out to me a letter from her older sister.

She said the joke going round Tel Aviv was that they should build statues to the country's two real founders: Adolf Hitler and Ernest Bevin.  
**Ruth Rothenberg**  
London NW3

### Agunot and halachah

► **The issue** of agunot is emotional and often has tragic consequences for the families of those involved. The behaviour of separated husbands who weaponise the *get* needs to be punished and the success of the recent private prosecution in the UK has been welcomed by rabbis across Europe.

Halachic and legal solutions to the problem are being explored. In 2013, the Conference of European Rabbis led the introduction of a law in Israel that means that offending husbands are detained when leaving or entering

Israel. Thanks to this law, dozens of agunah cases have been solved. The CER obtained cross-Knesset support for it and, when it is up for renewal next year, we will work with the relevant authorities to ensure its extension.

**Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt**  
President, Conference of European Rabbis,  
London NW5

### Come out or stay quiet?

► **As a** longtime admirer of the work of the St John Ambulance, when hosting a TV programme I was glad to be able to invite them to demonstrate to our viewers the best techniques to prevent children from choking.

As a result, several lives were saved, and I was honoured to be made a Serving Sister in the Order of St John.

Only when I attended the Awards and was awaiting my turn to receive a medal did I realise it was a religious ceremony, so I asked the lady sitting next to me if it mattered that I was Jewish?

"Oh no," she replied, but after a moment's thought: "But I shouldn't mention it now". So I didn't.

Years later, I now wonder if I should have come out? Was it unselfish of me to stay silent because otherwise I might have caused confusion or embarrassment, or was it selfishness because it could have cost me my medal?

When is it important to reveal one's Jewishness?  
**Dame Esther Rantzen**  
London NW3





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# THE JERUSALEM POST

## Striving for unity among the Jewish people is a practical undertaking

“Pursuing peace” means practically doing something about it. We pursue peace by reaching out to each other.

By WARREN GOLDSTEIN MAY 31, 2020 03:25



Israeli communities make signs with slogans of unity amid coronavirus lockdown  
(photo credit: OHR TORAH STONE)





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# THE JERUSALEM POST

Last week I received a call from Russian Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar suggesting that we issue a joint letter from chief rabbis around the world calling for Jewish unity. I was really drawn to this idea and thought it a timely one given the connection with the festival of Shavuot.

Shavuot, of course, celebrates the Divine revelation at Mount Sinai. "Like one person with one heart" is how our sages describe the sublime moment of Jewish unity as the Jewish people stood at the foot of the mountain ready to receive the Torah. We see that unity was a key element to Shavuot and the giving of the Torah. The question is, why?

The Maharal of Prague, the great 16th century [Torah](#) sage, has an explanation. He cites the famous statement from the Zohar: "The people of Israel, the Torah and God are one."

The deep connection between these three entities has profound implications. The Maharal explains that if the Jewish people are fragmented, this results in the Torah itself being fragmented. If we are divided, it compromises the integrity of the Torah itself. In other words, unity is a prerequisite for receiving the Torah. The Jewish people had to be united so that the Torah could come into the world whole.

That unity is only achieved if we make space for each other. This means transcending our ego, rising above ourselves, and developing the capacity to show understanding, forgiveness and compassion to those around us. This







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self-transcendence imbues us with holiness and greatness; it makes us Godly and brings us together and unified as one, as a united people ready to receive the Divine gift of the Torah.

These are very lofty ideas. Crucially, though, Jewish unity isn't an abstract idea. It needs to be put into action. As Pirkei Avot teaches: "Be like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace."

Rabbeinu Yona explains that "loving peace" means subscribing to the concept of [peace](#), aspiring to it as an ideal. "Pursuing peace," on the other hand, means practically doing something about it.

We pursue peace - we actively create the conditions for Jewish unity - by reaching out to each other, dealing sensitively and kindly with one another, building bridges, healing rifts, and settling our differences through concerted action.

This idea that unity is a verb rather than a noun - that it's something we do rather than simply pay lip service to - is the basis of our call to action. In our joint letter as chief rabbis around the world, we are encouraging Jews everywhere to take practical steps to pursue peace and create unity.

Our letter states: "If you are in a situation of conflict or tension or resentment or anger with another, use these days to reach out to that person and peacefully resolve the matter. If you know of people in similar strife, encourage them to do the same."





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By doing so, we can enter Shavuot and receive the Torah once more "as one people with one heart."

In the merit of our peace-making efforts, may God bless all of us, and the entire world, with health and healing.

The signatories to the letter are: Chief Rabbi of Israel David Lau, Chief Rabbi of Israel Yitzhak Yosef, Chief Rabbi of France Haïm Korsia, Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar, Chief Rabbi of South Africa Dr. Warren Goldstein, Chief Rabbi of Moscow and President of the Conference of European Rabbis Pinchas Goldschmidt, and Chief Rabbi of Argentina Gabriel Davidovich.

*The write is the Chief Rabbi of South Africa.*

<https://www.jpost.com/opinion/striving-for-unity-among-the-jewish-people-is-a-practical-undertaking-629786>

