



“In Gibraltar, the different religions show respect for each other”

Rabbi Dr Abraham Levy, who died last December, aged 83, was a leading figure in the UK’s Sephardi community and respected for his interfaith work. In an interview with **Bea Lewkowicz** in 2012, he spoke about how his ideas on ‘tolerance’ were shaped by his childhood in Gibraltar

I was sad to learn about the death of the influential Sephardi leader Rabbi Dr Abraham Levy OBE, who died in December 2022. A few months before, I had visited him with my husband and, although in failing health, he remained very positive. He told us emphatically: “If one looks at other people who are worse off than oneself, one appreciates one’s own life.”

This attitude shone through my interview with Rabbi Levy in 2012, when he talked about growing up in Gibraltar, his journey to becoming a rabbi, and his career as the spiritual head of the UK’s Spanish and Portuguese Jewish congregation (The S&P Sephardi Community). His proudest achievement was the creation of the Naima Jewish Preparatory School in Maida Vale, the first Sephardi school to open in London since the early 20th century, and he understood the importance of education (in Jewish and secular studies) for the future of the community.

Commenting on his death, King Charles said the leader had been a

“towering figure” and “respected teacher” who carried a message of tolerance. The King had met the rabbi when he visited the Bevis Marks Synagogue (the largest associated with the Sephardic community) for its 300th anniversary in 2001.

In the longer interview with Rabbi Levy, which you can find in the Sephardi Voices archive at the British Library, he urges future generations to be proud of their heritage: “We are part of what our parents, our grandparents, our great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents have made us. Be proud of these traditions, observe them, research them, and try to live by them. This is the way that Judaism will thrive and survive.”

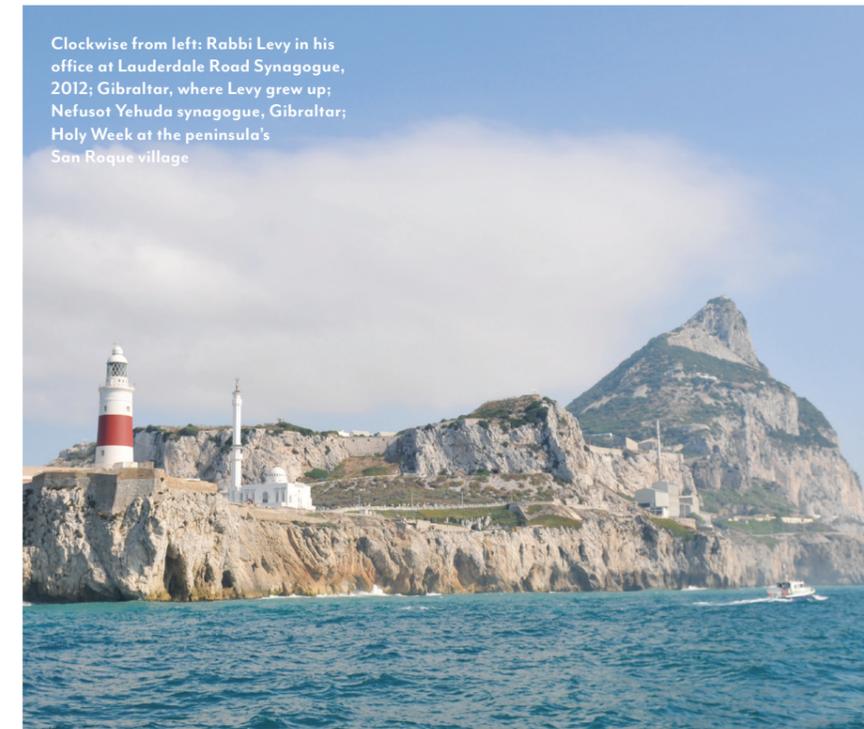
BEA LEWKOWICZ: Tell us about your family background.

RABBI LEVY: I was born in 1939 in Gibraltar. My family were originally from Castile, Spain. They left during the Expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and went to Morocco. There was always

a tremendous clash between those Jews who had lived in Morocco for centuries and those who arrived as exiles. When Britain captured Gibraltar [in 1704] the family moved there and has stayed there ever since.

In Gibraltar, whenever there is a marriage, the ketubah [marriage contract] lists the name of the person [getting married]. It also lists the name of his father and it lists as many generations back as possible.

On my father’s side, we can record 12 generations back, to the early part of the 17th century. My mother’s side also has Moroccan origin. My mother’s grandfather belonged to the Cansinos, a distinguished family – Jacob Cansino was the Spanish ambassador to Morocco in 1562. This was after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, and he could only remain a Jew and not be a converso [a forced convert to Christianity] because he was living in Morocco. We can trace that side of the family back to the 15th century.



BL: What languages did you speak at home?
RL: We spoke Spanish at home but at school English was the main language, so we were bilingual. I also learnt Portuguese as a child in Madeira, but I’m afraid I have forgotten it. We also often had [around us] Spanish written in Hebrew characters.

BL: Why were your family in Madeira?
RL: I was only one year old when we went to Madeira. Many Gibraltarians were evacuated because everybody was convinced that Franco was going to hand over Gibraltar to Hitler. Only the young men were left to defend Gibraltar. People were allowed to go to Madeira if they could prove that they could live from their savings for a year – the war wasn’t expected to last longer than that. But eventually when the war lasted for five years they all had to be helped financially. [Going to Madeira] did a lot of harm to the men because they couldn’t work. My father said that he only survived because of the encouraging speeches of Winston Churchill on the BBC World Service.

BL: What are your memories of returning to Gibraltar?
RL: My first memories are of Gibraltar as a garrison town. We didn’t have much but we were very happy and united. We had a Hebrew school, we had our little synagogue where we learnt [how to conduct] the services. We boys had to conduct a complete Shabbat service and we would read parasha [the weekly Torah portion] every week so that it became second nature to us. I went to Carmel College in England when I was 12 years old. So I only lived in Gibraltar for about six years, but I always consider myself a Gibraltarian. I go back

there a great deal and feel that what I learnt from the community’s attitude to Judaism has influenced me a great deal in my work as a rabbi in the UK.

BL: In what ways?
RL: The Sephardim never created ideological adjectives such as Reform, Conservative, Orthodox. It is these adjectives that create quarrels. In Gibraltar everybody worships together. Whether you are more or less observant, there are no theological arguments. In one synagogue, you might find someone who is ultra-Orthodox sitting next to someone who is only a little observant. We respect each other. Gibraltar has changed a lot since I left, many of the children have gone to Ashkenazi Orthodox yeshivot [religious schools] and seminaries in England. But their customs, their services, their synagogues – those still remain very Gibraltarian.

BL: Did you ever experience any antisemitism?
RL: I experienced no antisemitism. There is little antisemitism in Gibraltar and a lot of respect between religions. It is a spiritually developed town and religion is important to Gibraltarians. One year, Good Friday, the saddest day for Catholics, coincided with Purim, when Jews are frivolous and wear fancy dress. The Jewish community decided that out of respect for the Catholics, there would be no fancy dress in the streets of Gibraltar that year. My uncle, Sir Joshua Hassan, was chief minister of Gibraltar for well over 25 years and he was elected by a Catholic majority.

“It is adjectives such as Reform, Conservative, Orthodox that create quarrels”



BL: What made you want to be a rabbi?
RL: My mother always said that she wanted one of her sons to be a rabbi and that influenced me. I was always interested in religion and keen to express it. I studied at Jews’ College in London and was appointed a minister of religion and rabbi in 1962. To me, the biggest highlight has been opening up Naima Jewish Preparatory School in Maida Vale. I also very much enjoyed having opened the Young Jewish Leadership Institute [in 1978], which was the first serious Jewish adult education centre in London.

BL: You’ve also done a lot of work with the non-Jewish world.

RL: Yes, I enjoy that very much. It’s important and I work hard for interfaith relations. This representational work has had good results, particularly in the City of

London. The City is now very connected to Bevis Marks Synagogue. In 1992 the King of Spain made me a Knight Commander of the Order of Merit because of my work commemorating the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, and for getting an apology from the Church for what they had done [in the Inquisition]. Later, I received an OBE from the Queen, again for interfaith relations. I always say the same, England has been good to the Jews and the Jews have been good to England. I feel very strongly about this. ■

Intro by Bea Lewkowicz; interview edited by Daisy Abboudi. Sephardivoices.org.uk. **Dr Bea Lewkowicz** is the co-founder and director of Separdi Voices UK and the AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive.