

# CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO: THE STORY OF JCOSS — THE JEWISH COMMUNITY SECONDARY SCHOOL

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## Abstract

As early as the mid-1990s, individuals within the Jewish community in the UK were discussing the potential of setting up a pluralist Jewish secondary school in London. Until 1981, every Jewish school in the UK had operated under Orthodox auspices. By 1999, three pluralist primary schools were thriving, and the political and Jewish communal climate was ready to support the development of a new kind of Jewish secondary school. A feasibility study in 2001 led to the formation of a steering group and the project was born. Nine years later, JCoSS opened its doors in a brand new, state-of-the-art building in North London, and 150 eleven-year-olds began a new kind of Jewish secondary education. This article charts the journey of this project, from idea to reality, navigating political, economic and community challenges, and shows how one group of people changed the landscape of Jewish education in the UK.

## Introduction

On 6 September 2010, approximately 27,000 Jewish children started the new school year as students in a Jewish school in the UK. On that date, for the first time in 350 years of history of Jewish education in Britain, one of those Jewish secondary schools was a cross-communal school, as 150 children became the first cohort at JCoSS, the Jewish Community Secondary School.

In order to appreciate the significance of this occasion, this article will explore the environment within the UK Jewish community which led to the need for the JCoSS project and tell the story of the development of JCoSS from 2001-2010 as a historical, sociological and political phenomenon. It will reflect on lessons learnt and wisdom gained from an incredible journey.

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## The Jewish Community in the UK

Although Jews first lived in Britain more than 1,000 years ago, the first Jews to re-settle in the UK after their reinstatement in 1656 were Spanish and Portuguese Jews (Fletcher-Jones 1990). From the 1880s until the beginning of the First World War in 1914, mass immigration of Jews, primarily from Eastern Europe, led the Jewish population in the UK to rise by 100,000 to 250,000 by 1919. These Ashkenazi Jews soon outnumbered the local Sephardi population. A further 100,000 immigrants entered Britain in the 1930s and by 1950, there were estimated to be 450,000 Jews living in the UK. That number has dropped to approximately 285,000 (Graham and Vulkan 2008)

The UK Jewish population has a particularly strong rate of affiliation, with more than 70 percent of British Jews formally belonging to a Synagogue. Historically, synagogue communities in the UK have practised a traditional form of Judaism. The influence and infrastructure of the Orthodox movements has remained strong throughout, and even with the development of other synagogue movements, the current picture shows that the central Orthodox synagogues, which include the United Synagogues, the Federation of Synagogues (Ashkenazi) and the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogues (Sephardi), represent more than 60 percent of affiliated Jews in the UK. The Reform and Liberal Jews account for 27 percent, the Conservatives for just 2 percent and the strictly orthodox (Haredi) Synagogues, which is the fastest growing single Jewish sector in the UK, accounting for 11 percent (Valins, Kosmin, Goldberg 2002). This does not mean to say that more than 70 percent of affiliated Jews in the UK follow an orthodox lifestyle. For example, only a minority or members of the central Orthodox movements practise an Orthodox lifestyle.

Until 1981, every Jewish school in the UK operated under the auspices of the Orthodox movements. As can be seen in the preceding pages, the Orthodox movements dominated the UK Jewish landscape historically and numerically. It was the Orthodox Chief Rabbi in 1971 and then his successor in 1994 who led the call for intensification of Jewish life and continuity through education, and the philanthropists who were prepared to support Jewish schools financially have been, by and large, connected to the Orthodox community (Sacks 1994).

Whilst the strictly Orthodox schools continued to grow and had a homogeneous intake of pupils who came from Orthodox, observant lifestyles, the mainstream Orthodox schools attracted a broad range of pupils from across the religious spectrum. Providing a child was born of a Jewish mother recognised as Jewish by the Chief Rabbi, families were welcome to apply to any of the Jewish schools. Indeed, the schools have recognised that they have needed a broad range of applicants, in order to fill all available spaces. They know that they will not fill their places if they restrict entrance to Orthodox practising families, or even to those only belonging to Orthodox synagogues. And in practice, the outcome has

been that the mainstream Jewish schools in the UK have become pluralist in the make-up of both their pupil and staff bodies. They advertise themselves as community schools, and in terms of their pupil intake indeed they have been. The pluralism however, does not extend to the curriculum, either formal or informal, which at these Orthodox schools, follows an Orthodox Jewish studies curriculum. One might argue that as Orthodox schools, they have been perfectly entitled to follow a curriculum that best suits their ethos. They cannot, however, be called pluralist or community schools in respect of their formal or informal curricula.

## **A New Type of Jewish School**

The Reform and Liberal Synagogues were not in a financial position to support schools of their own, and more important, historically did not philosophically feel that denominational education was to be recommended or promoted. These synagogue movements felt strongly that their members should play their full part in British society and life. Jewish day schools, in their minds, segregated children and prevented them from contributing to their local community as well as to the world around them. All hints of segregation were abhorred (Romain 1991). In the 1970s, however, a decade after the Orthodox community, there grew a realisation that the supplementary school system of two or three hours Jewish education each week was incapable of instilling sufficient depth or quality of Jewish knowledge (Miller and Shire 2002). This may have been enough when classes took place three or four times a week and received strong parental reinforcement from home, but was inadequate preparation for knowledgeable young people with a strong Jewish identity. Spearheaded by Rabbi Dow Marmur, who made a proposal to the Reform Synagogues Conference in 1972, proposing that the movement adopt a policy of founding its own day schools, a group was set up to create a Reform Jewish day school. Akiva school opened in 1981, with fewer than twenty pupils, aged four to six. Today it is a thriving primary school, catering for more than 400 four- to eleven-year-olds.

Akiva school, until very recently, has also made no claims of pluralism. The school grew out of the British Reform Movement and strongly espoused reform values and practice. It was not until some eighteen years after it opened that it had to question its ethos, as two further school projects were developed which did not come from the Orthodox movements. These state-funded Jewish primary schools, Clore Shalom and Clore Tikva, were developed in response to a growing feeling amongst some Jews in the London area that the current Jewish day school provision was not broad enough or pluralist enough to suit their needs. Today, both are oversubscribed, open environments in which pluralist Jewish values are in full evidence, espousing these values through the formal and informal curricula.

In 1999, of the approximately 23,000 children aged four to eighteen attending Jewish day schools in the UK, a mere 150 attended the one Reform Jewish day school (Valins and Kosmin 2003). By 2015, out of approximately 27,000 children (Jewish Leadership Council 2008) who will be attending Jewish day schools, an estimated 2,500 will be in cross-communal, pluralist Jewish day schools. Of the total, although the majority will still attend single stream (Orthodox) schools, a significant minority will have an education undreamed of until recent years.

One question, of course, is ‘why should we develop a cross-communal school now?’. To answer that, one must look at the wider Jewish community in the UK. Until the 1980s, Jewish religious, cultural and educational life in the UK was relatively denominationally separatist. Limmud, which began as a five day, pluralist, cross-communal residential festival of Jewish learning in 1980 with eighty participants, has grown to become an organisation with two annual residential conferences and many single day events in the UK, attracting approximately 7,000 participants in 2008 (Limmud 2009). Limmud has moved increasingly from the edge towards the centre of Jewish events in the UK and it has been significant in paving the way for both other cross-communal, pluralist initiatives, for example the London Jewish Cultural Centre, Jewish Book Week, Jewish Film Festival and the new and developing Jewish Community Centre (JCC), as well as giving individuals the experience of the possibilities of pluralist Judaism (Miller 2011). Limmud was certainly one of the catalysts that made the creation of JCoSS a possibility, and the way that JCoSS will implement its pluralist approach to Judaism in practice is very much influenced by Limmud.

It is also important to look at what was happening in the wider educational world. ‘Schools Achieving Success’ was a UK government white paper eventually published in 2001 (DfES 2001). In paragraph 5.30 the government proposed to create more faith schools. The mood of this white paper in relation to faith schools reflected a government confidence in faith schools, and certainly within the Jewish community, a growing popularity. It should be noted that in the intervening nine years, the public and political mood has changed: it would have been far harder in 2010 to begin a process of developing a new single-faith secondary school.

## **The Beginning of the JCoSS Project**

As early as the mid-1990s, individuals within the UK Jewish community were talking idealistically about the possibility of setting up a pluralist Jewish secondary school. Whilst these conversations were non-specific, they undoubtedly triggered the impetus that led to the start of the JCoSS project. In Autumn 2000, professionals

in the then Centre for Jewish Education (CJE), now the Department of Jewish Education at the Leo Baeck College, approached the Jewish Community Day Schools Advisory Board (JCDSAB) for support. The JCDSAB had been set up in the late-1990s under the auspices of the Reform, Liberal and Masorti movements, and chaired by Peter Levy until May 2005 when Jon Epstein replaced him as chairman, to provide an umbrella support and advisory body for the developing pluralist Jewish primary schools. By Autumn 2000, Clore Tikva and Clore Shalom schools were both in their second year and thriving. Akiva school was beginning the process of applying to become a state-aided school, and preparatory exploratory work was taking place to create new pluralist Jewish primary schools in Westminster, Edgware, Manchester and south London. Faith schools were popular with the Labour government of the time and increasingly so with parents. Helena Miller, then deputy director of the Centre for Jewish Education — the education institute for the Reform and Liberal Movements — persuaded the JCDSAB to agree that the Centre for Jewish Education should be asked to undertake a feasibility study to ascertain the interest from the Jewish community, specifically the Reform, Liberal and Masorti movements, in the development of the project. Helena Miller took on this task, which took the form of preparing envelopes and posting photocopied paper questionnaires, and then physically counting and recording the answers to the questions, as the papers were returned to the Centre. Nine years on, the latest questionnaires being sent to parents as part of the research project mentioned later in this article were distributed and collated electronically using an online research software package. Times have changed!

From November 2000 to January 2001, 4,000 questionnaires were circulated to members of these three movements, in the London, north-west London and north-east London geographical areas. It is from these areas that the pupils for a new school are likely to come. Affiliated families with children from newborns to twelve-year-olds were sent questionnaires to gauge the interest of families whose children may attend a new community Jewish secondary school. In addition, questionnaires were sent to families whose children currently attend one of our three primary schools (a proportion of whom are members of Orthodox or no synagogues). Questions focused on the factors that parents consider important when choosing a secondary school for their children and on the importance that parents place on the availability of a community Jewish secondary school. Some family details were asked for, which enabled us to see demographic details of our respondents as well as current schools attended and synagogue affiliation, if any. Finally, respondents were given the opportunity to make comments and indicate any willingness to become involved in the project at a later stage.

Five-hundred questionnaires were returned. This was a good response, representing a total of 781 children. Twenty-four percent of respondents

indicated that sending their children to a Jewish secondary school was of the highest level of importance, as opposed to 9 percent of parents who answered that it was of lowest importance.

Seventy-two percent of replies indicated that parents are not happy with the current choice of Jewish secondary schools, and 76 percent would consider sending their children to a new state-funded Jewish secondary school if one was available to the whole community. Sixty-two percent of replies indicated that parents would prefer to send their children to Jewish secondary schools as opposed to non-Jewish schools and 71 percent of replies indicated that parents would consider sending their children to a new community Jewish secondary school outside the local area, if suitable transport was provided.

Of those families who replied, 42 percent were affiliated to the Reform Movement, 25 percent to the Liberal Movement and 15 percent to the Masorti Movement. Nine percent belong to other synagogues (mostly Orthodox) and the remaining 9 percent did not state affiliation.

The research generated an overwhelmingly and pleasingly positive response. Parents were very interested in the creation of a new Jewish secondary school that would serve the whole community. Replies to a questionnaire are no guarantee that pupils will be enrolled in a school, but they do give an indication of the needs and interests of the families involved.

In addition to replies about the Jewish nature of their children's education, parents were also asked about the importance to them of a school's facilities and teachers. The emphasis on the level of importance of excellent teachers (76 percent of replies) was rated higher than all other replies to all other questions. This indicated the importance of all-round excellence, grounded in a team of teaching staff able to provide education of the highest quality, both in Jewish and secular studies.

After the initial survey, it was by no means certain that a project would materialise. As was reported:

Of the 500 replies that we received, 185 respondents expressed willingness to help with this project. This is a far higher number than expected and further stresses the interest that families in our movements have in this project. Most of these offers were not specific, but there were some offers from journalists, lawyers and educators, for example. These 185 names and contact details will be kept on record, should the project develop to a point where these offers can be utilized.

The Advisory Board has clear backing from the families of a large number of potential pupils for the development of a new community Jewish Secondary School. The political, geographical and economic aspects of this project are less clear. At present, there appear to be no straightforward resolutions to what seem to be insurmountable challenges (Miller 2001)

There was enough determination to at least try to move the idea for a new school forward. In July 2001, thirty targeted individuals from the 185 stated above were invited to an initial meeting to develop a school. A cross-section of the 185 were invited, who had specific skills that we thought would be useful, for example, marketing, property agents, administrators and, of course, educators. Almost all who had been invited came to what turned out to be an energising start to our project. They were addressed by Helena Miller, and also by Susan Moss, an ex-head teacher herself, who, by then had assumed the role of part-time coordinator of the JCDSAB. Volunteers organised themselves into a main committee, with subgroups to look at admissions, finance, building, ethos and curriculum. At that meeting, two individuals came forward to co-chair the project: Linda Cooke and Jonathan Fingerhut, both self-employed, with affiliation to the Liberal and Reform Movements. On reflection, both these attributes of Linda and Jonathan were key to the success of the project: they were able to use their time flexibly and were able to devote many hours of the working day to the project. Whilst this clearly impacted on their working lives, it enabled them to devote themselves to turning JCoSS from an idea to reality. Both Linda and Jonathan's affiliation at different times to both the Reform and Liberal Movements meant they were able to see Judaism in a broader way than many who are bounded by their loyalty to one or other synagogue movement — very helpful when trying to develop a pluralist project.

## **Early Days**

The next year was one of hard work and goodwill from a band of volunteers. Rabbi Dr Michael Shire, Vice Principal of the Leo Baeck College, had the foresight to provide resources for this project within the education department of the college, and the vision to enable Helena Miller to spend time within her working week to support the project. From the beginning, JCoSS was a project with no home. Whilst we were always concerned to be seen as unaffiliated to one stream or other in Judaism, the project has always been grateful to the Leo Baeck College and to the Sternberg Centre for providing rooms for meetings and events through the whole period since 2001.

Working groups were set up: a building group, responsible for trying to find JCoSS a site and a local authority; a finance group, beginning the job of working on the costs and funding of a school; and a curriculum group, which began discussions around curriculum and ethos (disbanded early in 2003). A huge amount was achieved: ethos and principles documentation was written, a site was identified in south Hertfordshire, we lobbied our cause locally and at government level, funding was sought and seed funding was obtained from a small group of engaged Jews. By the end of the year, a further

petition supporting the idea of a cross-communal Jewish secondary school in the north London area had been signed by over 2,700 parents. Synagogue affiliation of our supporters was also cross-communal: 38 percent of replies were from those belonging to United Synagogues (orthodox), 33 percent from Reform synagogues, 18 percent from Liberal synagogues and 11 percent from Masorti synagogues. By December 2002, an application had been sent to the local authority under whose auspices it was hoped that the school would be situated. A public meeting was held in December 2002 at the Holiday Inn, Borehamwood, at which Rabbi Daniel Lehmann, Principal of the Community High School in Boston, U.S., spoke to an audience of 500, outlining how a cross-communal school can work well in practice. Our proposed school made headlines and updates were subsequently reported regularly in the Jewish and educational press in London and nationally. Our brand name 'JCoSS' and our first (orange) logo was developed in time for that public meeting.

The JCoSS project was taking place at the same time as another initiative, the Multi Faith Secondary School project. Chaired by Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, a group of Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders started exploring the feasibility of a joint school, catering for, and teaching the major faith groups in their own faiths, whilst teaching about the perspectives of each of the faith groups represented (Wittenberg 2002). The project did not reach fruition, but a history of JCoSS would be incomplete without mentioning this parallel project.

By 2003, we were openly negotiating for a site in Borehamwood, south Hertfordshire, and also privately looking at the British Aerospace site in Stanmore, so we were in fact pushing on two fronts. The Stanmore site turned out to be a blind alley that we were encouraged to investigate by individuals who were diverting our attention from the Borehamwood site.

The preoccupying urgency of the negotiations at that time was that JCoSS was in direct competition with an Orthodox group, who also wanted to open a new Jewish Orthodox secondary school in the same area of London as JCoSS. As early as 2000, this group had been in correspondence with Michael Burman, then Chair of Governors' of Clore Shalom pluralist primary school. Early in the negotiations, it was clear that the Orthodox and pluralist initiatives would not be able to work together because matters of pupil admission and personnel, status and ethos-related issues prevented a joint project from moving forward. Consequently, both projects pursued their own paths towards the creation of a new Jewish secondary school in Hertfordshire. By 2003, the Orthodox group were winning the race, presenting the JCoSS project with an irreversible setback. Demographic statistics showed that there were only sufficient projected numbers of Jewish pupils in London to sustain one further Jewish secondary school.



In 2004, after much political and local lobbying, JCoSS lost the campaign for the site in Hertfordshire, and the Orthodox group was given permission to build a school on the site. This became Yavneh College, which opened in 2006, and has become a popular, well subscribed school.

## **Moving Forward**

The JCoSS project reached a low point in 2004. We could not find a site or a local authority prepared to host us, and we had no funding. The seed money, donated most generously by Peter Levy and Stephen Rubin, had run out. The steering group felt demotivated and deflated. We were at a crossroads. Should we go forward or give up? We felt as if we had spent three years getting nowhere. We were jolted out of our depression by Rabbi Tony Bayfield, who gave a memorable rallying speech to the steering group in 2004. His rousing words encouraged us towards fresh enthusiasm. We began anew — lobbying government, meeting with local authority directors of education and forging new partnerships. Rabbi Bayfield had been an important friend of the project since the beginning and a supporter of plans for a cross-communal secondary school since the early 1990s, especially once his late wife Linda Bayfield became head teacher of Akiva school in 1996. From the outset, he used his contacts in local and national government, as well as his leadership of the Reform Movement to help us.

In June 2004, a meeting took place between JCoSS and David Miliband, then Schools Minister. This finally led to meetings with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and with the London Borough of Barnet in December 2004. Compelling arguments put forward in these meetings and persuasive behind-the-scenes lobbying led to the then government inviting JCoSS to lead a pilot project in parent-promoted schooling. The principle behind parent-led, voluntary-aided schools is that while the DfES covers the majority of the costs in establishing a new school, the community whose specific needs the new school will serve funds the extra costs associated with religion and ethos, such as additional kitchen resources, security and prayer facilities. It was also our aim that JCoSS would reach far beyond the minimum standards set by government and be a leader in environmental design, information and communications technology (ICT) and sports facilities.

Dialogue began with the London Borough of Barnet and in December 2005, funding was approved by the Department for Schools, Children and Families (DSCF) for 90 percent of the capital funding for a Jewish cross-communal secondary school: £36 million. The balance of what we estimated to be a £46-50 million project was to be raised by the community.

## **Forming Partnerships**

The following eighteen months was a period in which dialogue led to key partnerships being forged. From early on in the life of the project, we had been holding discussions with World Ort, which led to a memorandum of agreement being signed between British Ort, World Ort and JCoSS in June 2005. We employed an ORT consultant, Dr Shlomo Tsafrir, in July 2006 for several months to help move the project forward, before the role was suspended in December 2006, due to lack of work to fill the hours and lack of funds to pay for those hours. In retrospect, this partnership came at the wrong time in the life of the project.

It was also during this period that the JCoSS relationship with Norwood was developed. Norwood was, at the time, interested in a partnership with JCoSS that would enable them to move the Annie Lawson School for disabled children from its site south-west of London, to a more convenient north-west-London location. JCoSS was intrigued by the possibility of being able to integrate a specialist special needs facility within its project and also aware that a partnership with a highly regarded, established charity would help embed it as a serious enterprise. The Norwood partnership, begun with an initial, exploratory meeting with its executive director, Norma Brier, in May 2004, has continued to develop over the years, culminating in a formal signed agreement in February 2008. The exact facility being developed has undergone various iterations, from its original conception as a residential school for multiple needs, to its final development as a non-residential facility for children on the autistic spectrum. JCoSS is proud that it is the only Jewish secondary school in the UK to house and integrate a special resource provision within its site, reflecting the JCoSS commitment to inclusion. This is known as the Pears Special Resource Provision, due to the generosity of the Pears Foundation, who have not only given the financial support to help fund this aspect of the project, but have also significantly contributed to other elements of the project, for example the Social Responsibility Coordinator.

The Pears Foundation is also funding the JCoSS Research Project: the first longitudinal study in Jewish schools in the UK, following the lives of JCoSS pupils and their families during their seven years at JCoSS. This project, which began in Spring 2010, is being undertaken by Alex Pomson (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) together with Helena Miller (UJIA, London). Already, before the school has opened, surveys of families whose children will be entering JCoSS in its first cohort, as well as those families who have decided not to send their children to JCoSS, are producing a rich collection of data for analysis.

Perhaps the relationship which has benefitted JCoSS most materially has been the partnership forged with Gerald Ronson and his business interests. Alan Goldman first entered the project as an observer on behalf of British Ort at the

end of 2004, and from 2005 he became a founding Trustee of JCoSS. Although his route into the project was originally through Ort, Alan Goldman's business relationship with Gerald Ronson has been significant. Alan Goldman oversaw the building work from the beginning of the commission of the design brief in February 2005 to the opening of the school in 2010, and beyond, and his energy and drive, his common sense and wisdom tackled issues from the largest to the most mundane. After a lengthy process through the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU), the body through which all tenders from the public sector valued over a certain amount must proceed, builders and architects were contracted. Gerald Ronson officially took on the role of design and build advisor in March 2006, although he had been attending meetings with JCoSS personnel since November 2005. He has donated the lion's share of funding needed to offset the government shortfall and persuaded other individuals to give substantial donations to what has been, at £50 million, the most expensive Jewish communal project in the UK. In September 2007, Gerald Ronson accepted the role of president of JCoSS. Without Alan and Gerald, there is no doubt that the JCoSS project would have ended in 2004.

Other partnerships supported JCoSS, and still do. The Jewish Day School Community Advisory Board, JCoSS' advocate from 2000, has continued to provide background support as needed, and since 2007, JCoSS has affiliated to RavSak, the North American-based association supporting cross-communal Jewish schools. The Masorti, Reform and Liberal movements have also supported JCoSS, by speaking on our behalf, hosting JCoSS talks and events, and lobbying effectively on behalf of JCoSS within and outside the Jewish community.

## **Establishing JCoSS**

The London Borough of Barnet gave its 'in principle' support for JCoSS in January 2005, and in March of that year a London Borough of Barnet cabinet meeting approved the JCoSS application. East Barnet Upper School had, by then, been identified as a suitable site for JCoSS. At that time it was housing years ten to thirteen of East Barnet Secondary School. Our building project would enable East Barnet Upper School to relocate to a new building incorporating both upper and lower schools on the current lower school site.

The curriculum and ethos subgroup had been reconvened in 2004, comprising members of the original steering group, who were joined by Jewish educators from across the community to determine the nature and manner of delivery of the Jewish Studies curriculum and to consider the ways in which the Jewish ethos of the school would be supported and implemented. This group met for nearly two years. Robert Lobatto, then deputy head of a

large inner London comprehensive school, led a series of meetings to consider the curriculum analysis. The original plan was for years seven and eight to study within an integrated curriculum in ‘base rooms’ — large open-plan spaces. RHWL Architects worked with the group on initial design criteria for the school. JCoSS was, in 2005, proposed as a hexagonal purple and black building, with an assembly hall, theatre and synagogue. Much of that original brief was aspirational, and as the years went on, the school design became increasingly modest, to meet financial constraints. The ‘base room’ idea was disbanded and traditional classroom spaces integrated into the design. Nevertheless, the final design, confirmed in 2007, managed to retain many unique and original features, for example the concept of the heart space and the curved roof with wooden beams.

Papers on Jewish Studies were drafted by Helena Miller and Marc Shoffren, and the chair of the group, Jo Masters, led discussions which led to the JCoSS Mission and Vision Statement being finalised in March 2006, to the effect that, ‘JCoSS will be an inclusive, nurturing Jewish learning community, which will provide young people with an excellent education and prepare them to be responsible, active and knowledgeable Jewish citizens who embrace diversity within our community and in the wider world’. (2006) That statement remains true for JCoSS today.

One of the main reasons for wanting to develop JCoSS in the first place was to enable children who could not gain admission to the United Synagogue schools to have a Jewish secondary school education. In 2005, the first formal discussions were held to develop a JCoSS admissions policy. Linda Cooke, at that time co-chair of JCoSS, led a working party of steering group volunteers. We were advised legally by Richard Gold, a long-time supporter of the project, and one of the original trustees. The first admissions policy that was developed identified as high priority in case of over-subscription, ‘Jewish children who are not considered to be halachically Jewish by the admitting authorities of all other Jewish schools’ (JCoSS Admissions Policy 2005).

Ironically, our best intentions to provide an education for those unable to attend other Jewish schools became irrelevant after the legal ruling in 2009 which deemed it illegal to use birth status as an admissions criteria for a school (Supreme Court ruling 16 December 2009). This ruling, which considered that admissions policies are exclusively a religious requirement and not one dependent on ethnic origin, meant that all the mainstream Jewish schools had to revise their admissions policies. By that time, Irene Kay was heading up the JCoSS admissions committee, and the admission policy for the first cohort of students was as follows:

First Priority will be given to ‘Jewish Children’. For the purpose of admissions to the School, ‘Jewish Children’ are children who demonstrate,

or of whom at least one parent demonstrates, commitment to the Jewish faith or involvement in recognised Jewish faith activities. The criteria by which the above will be assessed are:

EITHER documentary evidence of membership of a synagogue  
**or** documentary evidence of attendance by a parent/carer or child at a minimum of 4 synagogue services between certain dates

OR a child's engagement in formal Jewish education (either provided, where relevant, at a school having a Jewish religious character, a Cheder/Hebrew school, or equivalent, or by a tutor)

and a parent/carer or child's involvement in a volunteer capacity in any Jewish communal, charitable or welfare activity in the last two years. (JCoSS website 2009)

It was during this period that JCoSS employed its first paid workers. The project had always had several hours of administrative support, using the services of the JCDSAB coordinator — Susan Moss until 2004, Maurice Ross briefly in 2004 and Sharon Silver-Myer from 2005 to the present day. By 2006, Sharon's employment had been transferred from the JCDSAB to JCoSS itself. By 2005, the trustees realised that volunteers could not cope with the volume of work needed to create a school. Linda Cooke stepped down as co-chair of trustees and was employed by JCoSS as their first project consultant, working on all aspects of the project, from liaising with Gerald Ronson and the architects, to meeting with local authority personnel, to managing PR elements of the project. Linda worked tirelessly for the project from April 2006 until September of that year, when, due to severe financial constraints, we were unable to renew her contract. This episode was not JCoSS' finest hour, and relations between JCoSS and Linda sadly terminated at that point. It should be recorded that JCoSS would not have succeeded without Linda's input in those first five years. Linda left many legacies to JCoSS, one of the most enduring being the name. It was the creativity of Linda and her husband Paul Shaverin which led to the Jewish Community secondary school acquiring its name. In 2008, governors and trustees were asked whether they wanted to rename the school to honour a Jewish personality or biblical figure. The decision was that the name 'JCoSS' (the acronym subsequently created by Jonathan Fingerhut) was so well known and so appropriate, that it should stay.

It is not an exaggeration to say that at this point we were on a knife's edge as to whether this project could continue or not due to the lack of funding. Pulling back from all but the core areas of development was the only option to keep us solvent.

In June 2006, the project briefly employed Robert Lobatto to work on the design of the school and its curriculum for 1.5 days per week. This arrangement was short-lived, due to the financial constraints previously mentioned and re-

organisation of the project to accommodate these. Robert stepped back from the project at that time, subsequently accepting a headship of a comprehensive school in West London. He joined the temporary governing body when it was formed in 2008.

By 2006, Jonathan Fingerhut decided that he could no longer continue as chair of the project, due to the effect it was having on his professional life. Since the beginning of the project, Jonathan had tackled every aspect of the project with huge skill, energy and humour. In August 2006, he tendered his resignation as chair, although he remained in the post until his successor, Michael Phillips, previous chair of Immanuel College, was appointed the following Spring and remained the chair of trustees for JCoSS, until he stepped down in 2011, to be replaced by Harvey Sonning. Jonathan has thankfully continued his role as a trustee, overseeing marketing of the project until the present day.

Late in 2006, financial constraints were able to be lifted. We had received a letter from Sally Brooks, head of schools capital at the DfES, giving the go-ahead to JCoSS, and Ben Rich stood down as a trustee, in order to be appointed as the JCoSS public relations manager. Since that date, Ben has continued to work to ensure that JCoSS has become well known to the UK Jewish community, from securing inserts in the *Jewish Chronicle* and *Jewish News*, to lobbying MPs, and a huge amount more, including more recently developing and implementing our marketing and recruitment campaigns. Both his and Jonathan Fingerhut's leadership have been instrumental in ensuring the successful recruitment for this first cohort of Year Seven entrants in 2010. It has been no mean feat in running a successful campaign to persuade 150 families to put their trust in, and sign their children up to, a school with no track record, no premises, no staff and an ethos that is different from all other Jewish secondary schools.

By 2006, our projected time line was for JCoSS to open in the Autumn 2009. In November of that year, the curriculum committee was disbanded, having gone as far as it could with no actual school for which to plan. We had considered Jewish Studies and Hebrew teaching, the ethos, class sizes, the sixth form, *kashrut*, curriculum and accommodation schedules, timetables, and design, as well as the job description for a head teacher.

A planning and design brief was developed and the trustees worked on this with PLACE education consultants in January and February 2007. A series of design workshops took place from January to March 2007 and Helena Miller, Alan Goldman and Jon Epstein represented the trustees, working with RHWL to design a school. In addition, local residents were consulted, and regular meetings were held with the local authority.

In 2007, JCoSS developed its new logo and the orange symbol stayed in place until 2009, when it was replaced by the same design, but in purple,

which is reflected in the black and purple colours of the new school uniform. The purple colour has been used as a motif in the heart space of the school, as well as on JCoSS literature.

## **Creating a New School: the Final Hurdles**

In early 2007, the statutory proposals to establish a new school were submitted to the DfES for approval, together with the building plans for the school buildings and site. In April of that year, a public exhibition took place at the East Barnet school site, to which the local community was invited. A milestone was reached in August 2007, when a Barnet town hall meeting packed with JCoSS supporters was told that planning was approved for both East Barnet secondary school and JCoSS. Finally, the end was in sight and at that point, the JCoSS trustees and supporters knew, for the first time, that we would have our school.

In September 2007, a special trustees meeting took place to determine how JCoSS would move forward into the next phase. Curriculum and ethos formed a significant part of that agenda, together with the design and build time scales. DfES finally gave JCoSS approval to proceed to tender in July 2008. Significant at that point was also to revisit our timeline for employment of key personnel. This led us to the realisation that it was again time to appoint a professional, and by October 2008, Stephen Lavender was appointed, three days a week, to support the educational work related to the continuing development of the project. Stephen came to us with extensive local authority and education experience, and has been invaluable in moving the project forward. His contract with JCoSS ended in August 2010, although his commitment to the project did not, and he will hopefully continue in a voluntary capacity as an associate member of the governing body of JCoSS.

By the beginning of 2008, we knew we would need to appoint a temporary governing body (TGB), to oversee processes related to the school prior to its opening, after which a permanent governing body would be formed. Robert Shrager, a previous chairman of West London synagogue, was appointed as chair of the TGB in January 2008, with Mike Grabiner, at that time still chair of the Reform Movement, as his vice chair. Robert and Mike became trustees also, and at that point, the role of the then trustees changed, with the TGB taking an increasing role in the development of policies and processes to do with the running of the school and the trustees role primarily concerned with building the school. In March 2008, an advert appeared in the *Jewish Chronicle* to invite interested people to apply as temporary governors of JCoSS and interviews were held. The TGB came into effect with the Instrument of Governance on 1 November 2008, although the group had been meeting unofficially since the summer.

In December 2008, JCoSS held its first joint trustee and governor development days, both at Avenue House in Finchley. The day focused on the research that JCoSS had commissioned into pluralist Jewish secondary schools. Helena Miller presented the research which had been undertaken by Sharon Cohen, and jointly ran the day with other trustees. The presentation led to ongoing discussions regarding the Jewish ethos and practices of the school. By the time the trustees and governors met again in November 2009 for its second joint day to discuss putting ethos into practice, it was possible to hand over organisation of the day to the professionals who were in place by that point — the head teacher and head of Jewish education. We had come a long way.

Robert Shrager remained in his role as chair of the TGB until his sad and untimely death in 2009. His final appearance had been at the JCoSS ethos day in December 2008, when he had come out of hospital for a few hours to introduce and set the scene for that day.

Mike Grabiner became chair of the TGB in March 2009 in his place, a role he still holds, and at that time Irene Kay became his vice chair.

In April 2008, tender documents were issued to contractors, contracts were signed in October 2008 and on 17 November 2008, JCoSS received the final formal letter from the Department for Children Schools and Families telling us that the project could go ahead. With RHWL and Ardmere appointed to build the school, in January 2009, work began on the site. The official ‘groundbreaking’ ceremony took place on 22 April 2009, at which Ed Balls, then Secretary of State for schools, spoke to a crowd of 200 Jewish and local educators and communal leaders: ‘This is a very important and significant day ... I will be going to other local authorities and telling them: go and learn what has been done at JCoSS. This school will be a good investment for the future of our country’ (*Jewish Chronicle* 2009).

And as JCoSS president Gerald Ronson reflected at the groundbreaking ceremony, ‘After ten years in the planning, in just six months we will receive our first application. Suddenly it seems very real’. (*Jewish Chronicle* 2009)

The next milestone to shape the project was the appointment of the head teacher. In March 2009, Jeremy Stowe-Lindner, then deputy head of Swakeley’s school in Hillingdon, was appointed after a three-day interview procedure. He took up his post in June 2009 and has proved beyond doubt that he was a superb choice for the role.

Almost as soon as Jeremy Stowe-Lindner took up his post, Elaine Robinson was appointed to the post of head of Jewish Education, a particularly significant role given the unique ethos of the school. Six months later, JCoSS appointed Patrick Moriarty as deputy head.

Through 2009, one of the most important tasks was marketing the school to prospective parents. Ben Rich masterminded a comprehensive programme



of exhibitions and talks in synagogues and schools, culminating in two official open events held at East Barnet upper school, on 13 September and 1 October 2009, at which Jeremy and Elaine spoke. Trustees and governors supported these and other events. In particular, Marc Herman, a trustee who had been significantly involved in the project since its inception, and Pam Goldsmith, also highly involved since early days and now a governor, who had energetically and effectively spearheaded the finance committee since 2006, attended many of these occasions on behalf of JCoSS. Professionals and volunteers from JCoSS were welcomed into many places during that year to speak to parents, but sadly not into any orthodox establishments. United and other Orthodox synagogue schools and synagogues vehemently blocked visits from JCoSS, and refused to distribute JCoSS brochures. United synagogue families felt differently and the first cohort of JCoSS pupils includes 20 percent who state that they belong to an orthodox synagogue (JCoSS Research Data 2010).

In June 2010, the Pears Special Resource Unit was officially handed over to Norwood management and David Wilson was appointed to head the unit. Also in June, Barnet and JCoSS agreed to limit pupil numbers to 150 in the main school, plus seven in the Special Resource Unit, for the first year.

During the final months leading to JCoSS opening, tensions ran high, owing to significant maternity leaves to cover; a building that was running behind its schedule for completion; design issues to reconcile; local residents angry at traffic congestion, mess and noise caused by the project; forty-six school policies to write; a self-evaluation framework to develop; student numbers to increase; more than twenty feeder primary schools to visit; and an entire staff team to appoint and induct.

Ultimately, as history now records, it all came together by the first day of students crossing the threshold at JCoSS.

## **Lessons Learned and Wisdom Gained**

For everyone significantly involved in JCoSS, whether from the very beginning, or from the later years, a steep learning curve has taken place. Whilst we have all contributed our own area of expertise to the project, whether it has been in education, finance, marketing, PR, building or administration, we have all been involved in areas well beyond our personal comfort zones. One characteristic we share is our unwavering belief in our project, and our preparedness to enter areas in which we have had no previous experience. None of us had previously set up a school and we all thought we could.

We learnt that you can indeed make things happen and change the status quo against all the odds. To return to the original starting point for JCoSS: we wanted to give parents a choice. We wanted to provide something that did not

exist in the UK. Despite many people telling us that it could not be done, that it would be bad for the UK Jewish community, that we would not succeed — that we *should not* succeed — we drove ourselves to go forward. We had enormous confidence in our idea and much chutzpah.

The JCoSS project was only successful because of the people who were involved. One person (the author of this history) started the project with a survey and analysed the data single-handedly. But that person knew that for the project to succeed, it needed a critical mass of enthusiasm, time and expertise. From the very first meeting in 2001, JCoSS was a group effort. From that first meeting, we continued to identify people who could help make a valuable contribution to the project. Along the way, some people reduced or gave up their involvement. A watershed moment occurred in 2004 when we realised that for the project to succeed, we needed to move away from a local, grassroots, parent-led initiative, to a multi-million-pound business project. We found the right people to partner with to make that project happen, but lost some of our initial enthusiasts, who felt that the project was changing in a way that caused them discomfort. We were also enormously lucky — we found people to give their voluntary time over and above any call of duty, and we found that the nature of the project attracted people and institutions of significance as our backers.

When we began, we naively assumed that the creation of a cross-communal secondary school would be a three- to five-year project. Some of the earliest papers on JCoSS end with a hope that the school would welcome its first students in 2005. And then in 2007. And in 2009. This project has taken us ten years from start to the school opening. As each expected deadline has passed, we have picked ourselves up and moved on. A hard moment was when a new Orthodox Jewish secondary school opened in Hertfordshire in 2006. That could have been JCoSS. But our tenacity and dogged perseverance has finally paid off. We did not waste a minute, but, dealing with each of the issues as described in the preceding pages, took time — far longer than we had originally expected. When one door slammed shut (as it did frequently over the years) we found another window open. Some of us who had become involved because we hoped to be parents of JCoSS pupils have been disappointed: our children have grown up. But in Jewish tradition, the story is that a person does not plant a tree for himself, but so that his children and grandchildren can enjoy its fruits.

Most projects involve an element of compromise. We learnt what we were prepared to compromise with, and what was sacred. We were prepared to compromise on the physical location of the school, and on the design of the buildings. We have never compromised on the mission and ethos as originally envisaged by the steering group. And our backers and partners have respected

our ethos. An ethos does not just happen though. Many meetings in 2004-6 explored the issues of ethos after the original statements of 2002. Hours of discussion led to a consensus of what we felt that this project and this school actually represented. Translating that ethos into practice has been tricky. Notes from meetings from 2004 onwards, as well as the record of the two ethos days held in 2008 and 2009 for trustees and governors, show that our preoccupying topics included *kashrut*, *kippot* and prayer as the top three controversial issues discussed. Many trustees and governors agreed to decisions which compromised their personal preferences, but which we all agreed were in keeping with a pluralist ethos.

Throughout the process it would have been easy to spend much of our time in opposition — to the government, the local education authority, local residents and most acutely, to our detractors within the Jewish community. JCoSS has never sought an argument. Those in charge of the project from the beginning have felt most strongly that we must rise above our antagonists. Our job has been to believe in our project and to remain ethically responsible in the way that we have dealt with every situation and every personality presented to us. This has, at times, been hard. If we had behaved differently, we may have obtained our school sooner, or damaged our opponents. But we have never wanted to gain at others' expense. Our policy has been to get on with the job without looking over our shoulders at our opponents or get involved in a fight of any sort. We feel this has paid off. We emerge from the last ten years able to face the Jewish and wider community in the knowledge that we did our best with honesty and integrity. We certainly made mistakes, and I have alluded to those in this article, but we never intentionally set out to harm or damage.

Any large-scale project such as this develops a complex risk assessment. We learnt in the past ten years that one can never predict every eventuality. One risk that has been an underlying fear since the end of 2009 was whether or not the building would be ready in time to move in before the start of the Autumn term 2010. The level of anxiety, particularly in the final months before opening, caused the head teacher and other significant personnel many sleepless nights. The head teacher's role in itself, prior to opening, turned out to be far beyond experience or expectations, with a huge burden related to such issues as dealing with architects and builders, *kashrut* authorities and community relations. In addition, as late as Spring 2010, we were faced with having to replace one of our senior, key members of the staff team with a maternity cover. I think we have learned that, as meticulous as one's planning can be, you just can't predict everything.

Ten years ago, if someone had said to Jonathan Fingerhut that he would be chatting on a regular basis to the Secretary of State for Schools; or to

Helena Miller that she would be designing school stock cupboards, they would have been very surprised. Everyone who became involved in creating JCoSS had to become experts very quickly in areas in which they had had little or no previous experience. That was very challenging for each of us. But it has also unfailingly been enormously rewarding. For those of us who had been involved in designing the building back in 2007, one of the most striking moments was early in 2010, when we walked through the buildings. Suddenly, we were standing in the heart space, in the learning resource centre, in the science laboratories. Our two-dimensional fantasy was taking three-dimensional shape. This was a profound and astounding moment.

## In Conclusion

On 6 September 2010, JCoSS opened in (part of) its brand new, state-of-the-art buildings in East Barnet. One-hundred-and-fifty Year Seven children walked through the gates in their brand new, black and purple JCoSS school uniforms. For those of us involved since the beginning, as well as for Jeremy Stowe-Lindner and his team, this was an enormously exciting, amazing and emotional day. A dream was fulfilled. How many people have had the opportunity to have taken part in such a huge and life changing project? We knew we had been privileged.

And of course, this is not the end of the story. In the long history of a school, this back story will be of decreasing significance. Because the real story of JCoSS will be connected to the lives of the JCoSS students and their families. For now though, it has been an amazing journey to reach this point. At times seemingly impossible, at other times incredibly daunting. It has always been a challenge and always a privilege. We have changed the landscape of Jewish education in the UK, and that is no mean feat. In my first paper on JCoSS, the report of the feasibility study in 2001, I quoted Hertzl. His phrase is still eminently appropriate: 'If you will it, it is no dream'. We have realised our dream.

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### **JCoSS Documentation**

- School Admissions Policy (2005)  
Mission and Vision Statement (2006)

## **APPENDICES**

### **Steering Group**

Lawrence Bamberg, Dani Benjamin, Rabbi Jonathan Keren Black, Elliot Boyd, Irene Blaston, Michael Burman, Rabbi Jeremy Collick, Linda Cooke, Jon Epstein, Jonathan Fingerhut, Adrian Fisher, Rabbi Paul Freeman, Peter Freedman, Beverley Friedgood, Rabbi Paul Glantz, Richard Gold, Alan Goldman, Pam Goldsmith, David Graham, Marc Herman, Robert Lobatto, Nick Marks, Jo Masters, Dr Helena Miller, Simon Moss, Susan Moss, Simon Oster, Lisa Robotham, Rabbi Thomas Salamon, Stuart Sampson, Andy Segal, Paul Shaverin, Rabbi Dr Michael Shire, Marc Shoffren, Gavin Shurmer, Cheryl Sklan, Rabbi Zvi Solomon, Deborah Weinberg

### **JCoSS Trustees**

- Bill Benjamin (2009–present)  
Julia Chain (2008–9)  
Linda Cooke (2006)  
Jon Epstein (2006–present)  
Ross Fabian (2006–present)  
Jonathan Fingerhut (2006–present)  
Alfred Garfield (2009–present)  
Richard Gold (2006–2008)

Alan Goldman (2006–present) Mike Grabiner (2008–present)  
Marc Herman (2006–present)  
Dr Helena Miller (2006–present)  
Michael Phillips (2007–present)  
Robert Shrager ז"ל (2008–9) Russell Tenzer (2006–9)

**JCoSS President**

Gerald Ronson

**JCoSS Governors: Temporary Governing Body (2008–10)**

Ian Abrahams, Alon Avner, Emma Cravitz, Jon Epstein, Sharon Gold, Pam Goldsmith, Jack Goulde, Mike Grabiner, Joanne Harris, Fredda Hurwitz, Dr Michael Hymans, Irene Kay, Jeremy Kosky, Robert Lobatto, Dr Helena Miller, Cllr Robert Rams, Lisa Wimborne

**JCoSS Consultants at Various Times from 2005 to Present**

Richard Bussey, Deacon and Jones  
Linda Cooke, JCoSS  
Robert Durston, Alligan  
Deborah Gilmore, Norwood  
Sandeep Halai, RHWL  
Mick Jones, Deacon and Jones  
Richard Jones, MACE  
Stephen Lavender, JCoSS  
Robert Lobatto, JCoSS  
Graham McAvoy, Alligan  
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Ben Rich, JCoSS  
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Jennifer Singer, RHWL  
Mark Sperring, MACE  
Tim Taylor, Deacon and Jones  
Edward Teeger, Norwood  
Douglas Trainer, Luther Pendragon  
Collette Tully, Alligan  
Grant Wood, RHWL

**JCoSS Administrators**

Susan Moss (2001–4)  
Maurice Ross (2004)  
Sharon Silver Myer (2005–present)

**Additional Significant Friends of JCoSS Over the Years**

Rabbi Tony Bayfield, Michael Burman, Rabbi Jonathan Keren Black, Peter Levy, Dr. Gabi Meyassed, Lenna Rosenberg, Stephen Rubin, Suzy Stone.

Disclaimer: The author has endeavoured to include all relevant people and events, and every effort has been made to verify facts before they have been included in this narrative. Apologies to anyone, and for any fact that has been inadvertently omitted, or misrepresented.