

**The Jewish Perspective  
(January 2014)**



# René Cassin and the Gypsy and Traveller Community – the Jewish Perspective

## **Introduction**

The Gypsy and Traveller community is currently facing intense discrimination and prejudice throughout the UK and around the world. This bigotry and racism has followed Gypsies for generations, and as a result of this systemic discrimination Gypsy communities often live on the fringes of society.

As a Jewish human rights organisation, René Cassin has a special interest in the experience of the Gypsy community. Jews and Gypsies have a shared history of persecution and discrimination, in that they were both the target of Nazi violence and destruction during the Holocaust of the Second World War. Following this horrifying humanitarian tragedy, all around the world the cry of 'never again' was heard, and yet the Gypsy community is still facing enormous discrimination and prejudice. It is commonly stated that racism towards Gypsies is 'the last bastion of culturally acceptable racism'.<sup>1</sup> But this shared history is only part of the reason René Cassin is working to support the Gypsy community. René Cassin strives to draw on the Jewish experience and ethics in order to support and secure human rights for all, and as such the continued struggle of the Gypsy community in the UK today is an important focus for the organisation.

## **The Jewish History of Discrimination and Abuse**

Jewish people have been the target of systemic abuse, prejudice and discrimination for centuries – throughout history they have often been regarded as the lowest tier of society.<sup>2</sup> Therefore the Jewish community has first-hand experience on the effects of discrimination, both on individuals personally and on the entire community as a whole. This is perhaps best seen in the portrayal of Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Elgot, J, 'Culturally Acceptable' Racism at Dale Farm, (September 8, 2011) The Jewish Chronicle Online, <<http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/54323/culturally-acceptable-racism-dale-farm>>

<sup>2</sup> Judaism Online, *Jewish Persecution*, accessed January 13, 2014 from <<http://www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/historyjewishpersecution/>>

characters in literary classics – from Shakespeare's swarthy and evil moneylender Shylock<sup>3</sup> to the immoral miser Fagin in *Oliver Twist*.<sup>4</sup> The racially motivated hatred, distrust and violence which was directed at Jews culminated in the events of the Holocaust – in which 6 million Jewish people were cruelly and deliberately murdered by Hitler's Nazi party.<sup>5</sup> But the Jews were not the only target of the Holocaust – the Gypsy community was also targeted and their population intentionally decimated during this time. Although there are no official numbers regarding the number of Gypsies killed in the Holocaust, it is estimated to be up to 1.5 million people.

René Cassin acknowledges that this shared history of discrimination puts the Jewish community in a unique position of empathy and understanding with the plight of the Gypsy population across Europe. However, while the Jewish population are no longer the target of such overt discrimination and abuse – and indeed are now often at the forefront of business and society – the Gypsy population has not been allowed to achieve the same social advances.<sup>6</sup> Instead, Gypsies still face both direct and indirect discrimination in many facets of their lives. This discrimination can be overt – seen in Gypsy children being fed into 'special' classes with a reduced curriculum as they are in many schools in the Czech Republic.<sup>7</sup> Or it can be concealed – in the lack of access to services such as healthcare for Gypsy people because they do not have access to a permanent address – often caused by the lack of availability of access to permanent campsites.<sup>8</sup>

### **Jewish Values**

Today the Jewish community are in a position where they are able to support and defend the Gypsy people in their continued fight against discrimination and prejudice. This is the impetus for the René Cassin Gypsy and Traveller advocacy

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<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, (2007, Penguin Popular Classics)

<sup>4</sup> Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, (2007, Penguin Popular Classics)

<sup>5</sup> Judaism Online, *Jewish Persecution*, accessed January 13, 2014 from <http://www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/historyjewishpersecution/>

<sup>6</sup> Beacon Council, *Gypsies and Travellers: Frequently Asked Questions, Myths and the Facts*, Accessed on 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2014 at

<http://www.bristol.gov.uk/sites/default/files/assets/documents/Myth%20busting%20booklet%20on%20Gypsies%20and%20Travellers.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> *D.H. and Others v. Czech Republic*, European Court of Human Rights, No. 57325/00

<sup>8</sup> Beacon Council, *Gypsies and Travellers: Frequently Asked Questions, Myths and the Facts*, Accessed on 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2014 at

<http://www.bristol.gov.uk/sites/default/files/assets/documents/Myth%20busting%20booklet%20on%20Gypsies%20and%20Travellers.pdf>

program, supported by Jewish core teachings and values – which call for charity and kindness to all people, especially those who are being oppressed.

The requirement to help those in need forms a central tenet of Jewish core values and teachings. As a Jewish organisation, René Cassin strives to draw on these values to promote and protect human rights around the world. Just as Jews are reminded that 'once we were strangers in the land as Egypt'<sup>9</sup>, it is important that they remember that they too must offer kindness and welcome to strangers.

Additionally, the concept of *Tikkun Olam* informs the Jewish perspective on social justice, as this phrase refers to the Jewish attitude towards the importance of justice, righteousness and freedom, and the protection and support of disadvantaged peoples. *Tikkun Olam* – to repair the world – is important for every individual, especially in the face of so many injustices in the world.

### **Jewish Ethical Quotes**

Jewish teachings often reference the ethical requirement for Jewish people to help and support strangers in need.

*"What is hateful to you, do not do unto others."*<sup>10</sup>

*"We were strangers in the land of Egypt, and so feel the pain of strangers."*<sup>11</sup>

*"When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not ill treat them. The stranger who lives with you shall be treated like the native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt."*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Exodus 22:21

<sup>10</sup> Hillel the Elder (Talmud, tractate Shabbat 31a)

<sup>11</sup> Naftali Brawer, 'Open UK's doors to Syrians', *The Jewish Chronicle*, accessed 13.1.2014 from <http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/114587/open-uk%E2%80%99s-doors-syrians-say-rabbis>

<sup>12</sup> Vayikra 19:33-34

René Cassin, JHub,  
152 West End Lane,  
London NW6 1SD

**Tel:** 020 7443 5130

**Fax:** 020 7443 5159

[info@renecassin.org](mailto:info@renecassin.org)

**rené**   
**cassin**   
*the jewish voice for human rights*