Making the Jewish case for Human Rights in the UK
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René Cassin can only operate with the generous support of our sponsors and supporters. In particular, we thank the Little Butterfly Foundation, without whose support we would not have been able to produce this resource pack. Additionally, our thanks go to all whose donations allow us to continue to make the case for human rights in the UK:

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“René Cassin is doing much more difficult work, much trickier work now than when Sigrid Rausing Trust first began as a donor in 2012. René Cassin’s work is less about formal human rights standards and legal principles, and is more about making them meaningful for people. Progress will be slow but this trend is tremendously positive.”

Sigrid Rausing Trust

“When we first met René Cassin, they were a nascent group full of potential, but woefully under-resourced. The Pears Foundation has been a partner on the journey with René Cassin for a decade now. We believe Jews and Jewish institutions need to live in a nexus between the particular and the universal. What this means is hard to define but we know it when we see it – and René Cassin is a perfect example of that. Top notch credibility in the human rights world and top notch education in the Jewish world. René Cassin shows that the Jewish community is at the forefront of the human rights agenda – reinforcing that this is a community many Jewish people will want to be a part of.”

Pears Foundation
Introduction

A word from our CEO

Human rights are an essential part of Jewish identity; they are born out of Jewish values and Jewish history and form an intrinsic part of our present and, ultimately, our future.

When René Cassin, the Jewish voice for human rights, was set up in 2000, the idea was to create a unique platform through which human rights could be championed in the UK by the Jewish community, both within the community and as part of wider society.

Our work contributes a distinctive and contemporary Jewish perspective to issues affecting the human rights of some of the UK’s most marginalised communities. We have been at the forefront of calls to end indefinite immigration detention; worked to counter discrimination and hate crime against minorities; highlighted the scourge of modern slavery and human trafficking; warned of threats to human rights safeguards; and built support for human rights values amongst British Jewry.

Today, René Cassin enjoys the respect of both the human rights and Jewish communities, influences policy effectively in its core areas, offers high quality events and provides opportunities for learning and activism.

Today, as we celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), we are living through volatile and uncertain times, where the central values that human rights stand for are overlooked and in places weakened. Therefore, the need to build a community of support, and a Jewish voice for human rights, is increasingly important.

In this resource, we have tried to share the interwoven stories of Jewish values, Jewish experience and Jewish human rights heroes, illustrating the profound impact they have had in shaping and forming the modern human rights framework, and the importance of human rights for Jewish people today.

Our work will continue to mark and celebrate 70 years of legacy but will also ensure the sustainability of this legacy by empowering and inspiring tomorrow’s human rights activists.

Mia Hasenson-Gross, CEO

A word from our Chair of Trustees

“Disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind”. These stark words come from the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For a world torn apart by war and struggling to come to terms with the atrocities committed by the Nazis, the Declaration marked a turning point – a determination that never again would the community of nations stand by and allow such horrors to happen.

Known as ‘the Father of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’, it was a French Jewish lawyer who, having lost 29 members of his family in the Holocaust, set about drafting a document which would establish human rights for all humanity. This man was named René Cassin.

When, in 2000, a group of young British Jewish social activists set up a charity to promote and protect universal rights, drawing on Jewish experiences and values, Cassin’s example was so powerful they decided to name the charity in his honour. And so, René Cassin – ‘the Jewish voice for Human Rights’ – was born.

“As we celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there has never been a greater need for strong Jewish advocates, actors and partners making the case for the contemporary importance of human rights values and protection. There has never been a more important time to get involved in our work.”

Daniel Silverstone, Chair of Trustees, René Cassin
A Founder’s story

We began René Cassin in the late 1990s to be a Jewish group using the experience of Jewish people to promote the human rights of all people. We realised that our experiences as Jews, and our insights into human rights as Jews, gave us weight in the wider community on these issues. When we spoke on behalf of vulnerable groups, we were able to say with authority “the world should not let this happen to anyone else”.

Today, I’m still proud that there is a Jewish organisation that is committed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which tells the Jewish community that human rights matter... and that human rights are a part of what we, as Jews, are.

In Pirkei Avot [Ethics of the Fathers], Hillel asks: ‘If I am not for myself, who will be for me?’ But Hillel also asks, ‘If I am only for myself, what am I?’ We as Jews have never been, and cannot ever be, just for ourselves.

“Human rights may be a modern concept, but the moral imperative behind them is as old as Judaism itself. It’s our duty to look out for justice for everybody. It’s part of our DNA as a people. René Cassin makes it its job to stand up for this as a proposition.”

Daniel Kingsley, Co-Founder, René Cassin

From our Advisory Council

René Cassin takes its name from the Jewish activist and intellectual who helped to change the world by shaping the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, adopted exactly 70 years ago. His vision of a world where no-one is deprived of the fundamental rights and freedoms which define our humanity drew from both Jewish experiences of persecution and exclusion and from Jewish ethics of solidarity and justice which he proudly proclaimed as the foundational values of the UDHR.

With this inspiration to guide it, the modern British NGO, René Cassin, draws on the particular injustices facing marginalised communities in the UK today to champion the universal values of equal treatment and fairness for all.

“In our troubled world where nationalism and populism are on the rise once more, René Cassin provides a beacon of hope for young people that the lessons learnt from the terrible events of the Second World War will not be forgotten and that the essential purpose of universal human rights is passed on to new generations.”

Francesca Klug OBE, human rights academic and activist
René Cassin and the Jewishness of Human Rights
Who was René Cassin?

René Cassin was born in 1887 to a Sephardi Jewish family in the South of France. Throughout his life, Cassin combined political leadership in France, secular leadership within the world’s Jewish communities and a deep commitment to peace and human rights.

Cassin first showed this commitment to human rights as a leader of France’s veterans during and after the First World War. In the 1920s and 1930s, Cassin was a French delegate to the League of Nations in Geneva. There he witnessed the destructive power of the doctrine of ‘absolute state sovereignty’, which eventually undermined the League and became a contributing factor to the start of the Second World War.

From 1940, René Cassin was at the heart of Charles de Gaulle’s ‘Free French’ government-in-exile in London. De Gaulle appointed Cassin as President of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), the representative body of the Jews of North Africa, the Middle East and Persia. Cassin’s leadership enabled the AIU’s 100 schools to remain open to 50,000 Jewish students throughout the war. He would remain president of the AIU for 30 years.

With the defeat of Nazi Germany, the whole world became fully aware of the horrors of the Holocaust. Cassin himself learned that 29 members of his family had been murdered by the Nazis. His response was that such atrocities should ‘Never Again’ be allowed to happen and he dedicated the rest of his life to the creation of an international system of human rights.

In 1948, he co-drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which guaranteed the rights of the individual, and of groups like the Jews, in the face of over-mighty sovereign states.

In 1968, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role as lead jurist of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

René Cassin always maintained that the concept of human rights emerged from the same roots as his Judaism. A member of that generation whose response to war was to promote peace through international law, René Cassin integrated his life as a Jew with his life as a jurist. For these reasons, he is the inspiration behind our organisation.

“Human rights are an integral part of the faith and tradition of Judaism. The beliefs that man was created in the divine image, that the human family is one, and that every person is obliged to deal justly with every other person are basic sources of the Jewish commitment to human rights.”

Monsieur René Cassin, 1974
Human Rights at the heart of Judaism’s most important texts

“There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you.” Exodus 12:49

“All mankind is created in the divine image.” – The Torah

Torah’s genius is to combine two roles: a story of origins (of the world, of the tribes of Israel) and a code of law. As a result, our Jewish religio-cultural identity is intertwined with our behaviour to others in the world.

In particular, the twin commandments of ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18) and ‘love the stranger as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:34) are historical firsts – placing all of Israel, and all those aliens who have come to live among Israel, under one law. For Israel and stranger alike, one law applies – regardless of nation, tribe, wealth or power.

Torah also insists on protections for the socially vulnerable. The refrain to protect the ‘stranger’ is mentioned over fifty times in the Five Books of Moses – along with the commandment to care for the ‘orphan and widow’.

Why this care for those who are not like us? Torah blends two answers: one derived from Adam and Eve, the other from the very roots of the formation of the Jewish people.

Twice in Genesis, Torah tells us that God created mankind in his own image. The first, Genesis 1:27, states that Adam, the first man, was formed in God’s image (his ‘כָּלִים’). Shortly thereafter, in Genesis 5:1, we read that Adam and ‘Adam’s line’ share God’s ‘likeness’ (his ‘רוּחַ’). All of humanity, in all our wonderful diversity – contain within us an equal share of the divine.

Torah’s other rationale for justice involves and revolves around the theme of Israel as minority – as ‘strangers in a strange land’. God tells Abraham that his children will be strangers in Egypt. Israel’s enslavement there is presented as an abuse of Israel-as-minority by Pharaoh. Even as Moses writes the final chapters of Deuteronomy, it is clear that Torah requires of us to care for the vulnerable, the strangers-within-us; and that one law, Torah’s law, applies to all parts of society.

“Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice. Aid the wronged.” – social justice in the Prophets

Justice was a preoccupation of the prophets of Israel, from Samuel (c.1050 BCE) to Malachi (c.430 BCE). Famously, we find God, in Isaiah 1:11-17, rejecting an Israel that is ritually pure, but which lacks social justice. Instead of ‘sacrifices, oblations, incense and observance of new moons and sabbaths’, God cries out His demand:

Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; Aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; Defend the cause of the widow.

The prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zachariah and Malachi all return to this theme of Justice – for the vulnerable, the stranger, the widow and the orphan – in their prophetic writings.

The Rabbis and Talmudists: “He who saves one life is as if he has saved the whole world.”

The Judaism of the Rabbis is predicated on the sanctity and dignity of all human life. The Rabbis of the first millennium CE expounded and elucidated the principles of Torah into lessons on how individuals, groups and states should interact, and the obligations of society to the vulnerable.
Two of the most famous Rabbis of all time – Hillel and Akiva – are closely associated with Judaism’s requirement to care for others. Rabbi Hillel is famous for his explication of the Golden Rule – ‘That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study.’1. Another of Hillel’s axioms begins, famously, with a call for looking after our own selves – ‘If I am not for myself, who will be for me?’. But the verse then challenges us to think and act for other people as well as ourselves ‘When I am for myself (alone), what am I?’2.

Rabbi Akiva held the reputation of being compassionate towards the sick, the needy, and the poor. The Midrashic text, Genesis Rabbah, records a debate between Akiva and his contemporary, Ben Azzai, as to what is the ‘central principle of Torah’. Akiva argues for ‘Love Thy Neighbour As Thyself’ (Leviticus 19:18); Ben Azzai argues for Genesis 5:1 (‘This is the record of Adam’s line’ - discussed above). What emerges from the debate, in a summary provided by Rabbi Tanhuma, is that any action which shames an individual is also an insult to God.

Other texts also leverage the insight that mankind was created in the likeness of God to describe the duty of each individual to other people. The Mishnah argues for the importance of each individual life, for each person is a world in him or herself and ‘He who destroys one life, it is as if he has destroyed the whole world; and he who saves one life, it is as if he has saved the whole world’3.

Maimonides: live a life full of loving-kindness, judgement and righteousness

In Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides, the great twelfth century Rabbinic authority, teaches that mankind’s duty is to emulate ‘God’s ways’ on Earth (imitatio dei). But how can we know what ‘God’s ways’ are?

Maimonides finds the answer in Jeremiah 9:23 – “I am the Lord which exercise hessed, mishpat and tzedakah (loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness) in the earth. For in these things I delight.” Maimonides devotes the final pages of the Guide to explaining the meaning of these three Hebrew terms which together describe the gold standard for moral behaviour.

Judaism – a wellspring for Human Rights

The classic Jewish texts of the first 2500 years call us again and again – first as Israel, then as Jews – to accept our responsibilities as individuals and as a nation to care for other people, and act to justice, compassion and loving-kindness to those people we find in pain, or those who are vulnerable in society.

These are the foundations for ethical behaviour between individuals, between peoples, and between nations. Generations of Jews have been educated to hold these foundations in the highest esteem. In the past five hundred years, as the world began its slow crawl into modernity, it was these values which shaped the encounters between the world’s Jewish communities and the peoples and monarchs with whom they lived. From these encounters would emerge the legal principles which, over time, would be known as human rights.

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The starting point – community relations with kings and princes

In medieval times, Jewish communities in Europe were subject to obligations and duties imposed (or, at best, negotiated by their elders) by the prince or power that governed the land in which they lived. Even in the Magna Carta of 1215, famous as the first collection of rights for English nobles and freemen, Jews were specifically denied basic freedoms. It was common for the crown to prevent Jews from undertaking most economic activities, with the notable exception of moneylending. Of course, kings across Europe soon realised that debts to their Jews could be eliminated by the vastly popular act of expelling the Jews from their realm. Jews were expelled from England in 1290, from France in 1306, from Warsaw, Lithuania and Sicily in 1483, and from Spain in 1492.

In the early-modern Europe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it remained common practise for Jewish elders to negotiate rights and obligations with the local prince. In France, for instance, the elders of the Sephardi Jews of Southern France were bound by a different (and materially better) contract with the French crown than that negotiated by the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Alsace. Even so, in the dying years of pre-revolution France, the Crown passed a series of laws that threatened all French Jews once again with expulsion and reduced economic rights.

The French revolution

The French revolution of 1789 marked the end of the old system of royal charters with individual communities. In its place, the revolutionaries announced the Declaration of the Rights of Man on August 27, 1789. Initially, the Jews were excluded even from these so-called ‘universal’ rights.

French voices in favour of Jewish emancipation argued that it was impossible to have a society in which all men of whatever condition were given equal rights and status, except a relative handful of Jews. Enemies of the Jews asserted that the Jews were bad by character and by nature.

The French Revolutionaries were thus first to formulate a ‘Jewish Question’, asking whether the hatred directed at Jews originated in the ‘bad’ or ‘inferior’ nature of the Jews.
of the Jews themselves, or was an outcome of the oppression experienced by Jews at the hands of the majority culture. This was the ‘Question’ to which, a century and a half later, the Nazis would suggest a ‘Final Solution’.

The emancipation of the Jews in France eventually took place on the basis that: “The Jews should be denied everything as a nation but granted everything as individuals”. A similar conclusion was reached in the Netherlands, following the revolution of 1795. Equal rights as individuals, but no group rights as a people.

The emancipation of the Jews following the French revolution began a century-long battle for emancipation elsewhere in Europe. Napoleon’s conquest of Europe briefly spread French laws across much of the continent, but these gains were temporary. Within a few decades of Napoleon’s defeat, progress towards Jewish emancipation in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the German principalities, Russia, and in significant parts of Prussia had reversed. Little, other than the stirring in Jewish hearts, had changed.

The revolutions of 1848 and their impact on Jews

The year 1848 saw the most widespread revolutionary wave in European history. Over fifty countries experienced revolutionary activity, which was typically liberal and democratic in nature. Widespread access to printed books enabled the spread of new ideas, such as popular liberalism, nationalism and socialism. Many revolutionaries adopted an objective of Jewish emancipation, equal civil and political rights with the rest of the citizens. Many of the revolutionaries were Jews, who fought and died with non-Jewish comrades.

By 1867, Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, who had been subject to severe restrictions on where they could live and how they could be employed, were emancipated. By 1869, Kaiser Wilhelm I of the new German Empire was ready to emancipate his Jewish subjects too. Of the great Empires of Europe, only Russia would fail to emancipate its Jews until the dissolution of the Tsarist throne in 1917.

The high water mark of Jewish rights

The final decades of the nineteenth century began a sixty-year high water mark for Jewish rights in Europe. With the exception of Russia, Europe’s Jews were able to live and work freely across the Empires in which they lived. Huge numbers of Jews migrated to the big cities of Europe. However, the 1848 revolutions also marked a turning point in the development of modern anti-Semitism through the development of conspiracies that presented Jews as representatives both of the forces of social revolution and of international capital. In 1848, for instance, Eduard von Müller-Tellering, the Viennese correspondent of Marx’s New Rheinish Newspaper, declared: “tyranny comes from money and the money belongs to the Jews.” The cause celebre of this new antisemitism was the Dreyfus Affair, which gripped the world from 1894 to 1906.
A new anti-Semitism emerges in Germany

The revolutions of the 1840s, and the emergence of the new, unified German Empire in 1871, provoked extreme reactions in many European communities. In particular, Protestant Germans in the north and east of Germany found themselves threatened and isolated as the rich southern and western Catholic principalities became the power-brokers of the new Empire. In response, they developed a ‘new ersatz religion of alien-free German-ness (Deutschtum)’. In 1880, the official Prussian State Historian, Heinrich von Treitschke published A Word about Our Jews, the ‘founding document of modern political anti-Semitism.’

Europe had seen centuries of discrimination and persecution against Jews. The innovation of this new anti-Semitism was the addition of the toxic ingredient of race. ‘True German-ness’ was in the blood. These anti-Semites spurned the middle-class movements, which so many Jews had embraced, for the elimination of barriers of religion, class, geography – values that would later form the backbone of the human rights framework.

By 1892, Germany’s powerful Conservative Party had adopted as official policy the opposition of ‘the often obtrusive and corrosive Jewish influence on our national life’. In Germany’s 1893 election, overtly anti-Semitic candidates won sixteen seats in the Reichstag.

In the following decades, anti-Semitic parties representing the interests of the old aristocracy would jostle for power with socially democratic parties demanding a modern, democratic state. As the ancien régime saw their prestige and power at risk of ebbing away, they gambled on an expansionary war against their oldest enemy, the Slavs of Russia. The result was the Great War, the national humiliation of Versailles, and, eventually, the emergence of Hitler’s National Socialist Party.

Anti-Semitism, Nazism, Holocaust

The period of Nazi power, from 1933-1945, was calamitous for Europe’s Jews. Hitler’s overt anti-Semitism had won him the votes and admiration of millions in Germany and in many of the countries it occupied such as Poland. He rapidly reintroduced discriminatory policies against the Jews, then planned and put into effect the ‘Final Solution’, a dramatic attempt to answer the ‘Jewish Question’ first posed during the French Revolution. The result was slave labour, detention in concentration camps and catastrophic loss of life. Over six million Jews, as well as many other undesirable üntermenschen were murdered, including LGBT, disabled, and 500,000 Romani Gypsies.

How could the Nazis get so close to success in their plans for genocide?

Raphael Lemkin, who first coined the word ‘genocide’, was able, using his library of Nazi documents, to describe the process.

The first step was denationalisation, making individuals stateless by severing the link of nationality between Jews and the state, so as to limit the protection of the law.

This was followed by dehumanisation, removing legal rights from members of the targeted group.

The third step was to kill the nation ‘in a spiritual and cultural sense.’ Jews were forced to register, wear a distinctive badge, then move into designated areas, ghettos.

Seizure of property, the fourth step, rendered the group ‘destitute’ and ‘dependent on rationing’. Decrees limited rations of carbohydrates and proteins, reducing the members of the group to ‘living corpses’.

Spirits broken, individuals became ‘apathetic to their own lives’, subjected to forced labour that cause many deaths, and to further measures of dehumanization and disintegration as they were left to await the ‘hour of execution’.

1. J. Hawes, The Shortest History of Germany, 2017 p117
2. Sands P, East West Street, 2017 p166
As the Second World War broke out, there were 75,000 people of Germanic origin within Britain’s boundaries. Over 30,000 of these refugees from Hitler were Jews from Germany or Austria who had arrived at the very end of the 1930s.

A slow, orderly campaign of grading the aliens into categories representing the risk to national security was ordered. But in 1940, when Italy entered the war, the security services were overwhelmed by the need to assess and grade several tens of thousands of potentially hostile British-Italians. The wartime Government, acting in response to panicked headlines in the popular press, ordered the immediate internment of all ‘enemy aliens’ between the age of 16 and 60 – even those who had already been found by tribunals to be ‘genuine refugees’ (known in official parlance as ‘friendly enemy aliens’). ‘Collar the lot’ went the order from Churchill’s government.

A number of internment camps sprung up in Britain, and soon the Isle of Man emerged as the ideal place – far from civilian and military operations – to hold the large numbers of ‘enemy aliens’. These camps were often chaotic, initially with few amenities such as furniture, beds, toilets or medical facilities. In these camps, ‘aliens’ of all sorts – pro-Nazi sympathisers, anti-Nazi Germans, and German Jews were mixed together indiscriminately.

By the middle of 1940, over 10,000 male aliens and over 4,000 alien women and children were interned in various camps around the island. Many thousands were Jews, held there without charge or trial.

The internees were allowed some small freedoms, the ability to swim in the sea, for instance. But it would take another full year for families to be reunited in family apartments – up to that point, family visits were restricted to one per month.

Despite the constraints on their liberty, the Jewish internment experience had some positive elements. Over 200 Jewish physicians were interned, many of whom had brought their medical equipment with them. These doctors and surgeons soon mobilised to assist the camp medical teams and local hospitals with their expertise. Art flourished, as did other crafts. An English-speaking synagogue was formed, meeting weekly.

In their camp newspapers, the Jewish and anti-Nazi internees were asking why the British Government preferred to intern the anti-Nazi aliens, rather than harness their minds and bodies to the war effort. Indeed, from 1941 onwards, the numbers of Jewish inmates began to dwindle as they were offered the chance to enlist or were released to work for the war effort. Nonetheless, some Jews remained interned until the end of the war in 1945.

The legacy of this internment within the Jewish internees is mixed. Many were embittered at the loss of liberty, and at the dangerous forced intermingling with Nazi sympathisers. Fritz Lustig, who was freed on joining the British Army, recalls his anger at the British popular press for their populist, anti-refugee headlines in 1939-40. “We had been vetted by a tribunal at the beginning of the war,” he said, “and we had been declared so-called ‘friendly enemy-aliens. After we had been vouchsafed, why were we suddenly considered dangerous? It was just a measure caused by the right wing papers.”
“We cannot keep telling the world in endless sentences: Do not murder members of national, racial and religious groups; do not sterilize them; do not impose abortions on them; do not steal children from them; do not compel their women to bear children for your country; and so on. But we must tell the world now, at this unique occasion, do not practise genocide.”

Raphael Lemkin
Raphael Lemkin (1900-1959)

Raphael Lemkin was a lawyer of Polish-Jewish descent who is best known for coining the word genocide and for leading the United Nation’s adoption of the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948.

Forty-nine members of his family, and almost the entirety of the Jewish community in his birth place of Polish Galicia, were murdered in the Holocaust.

Lemkin spent the Second World War first in Sweden, then from 1941 in the United States. Whilst in neutral Sweden, he worked with Swedish businesses and consulates across Europe to create a library of Nazi decrees, proclamations and ordinances relating to the deliberate policy of entire nations and peoples, including the Jews.

Following the war, Lemkin was the strongest advocate of the view that the way to prevent future mass killings of individuals was to protect the group to which the individuals belonged.

Despite intense lobbying, he was unable to convince the victorious Allied powers to include genocide amongst the indictments at the Nuremberg trials.

He switched his attention to lobbying governments at the new United Nations, and after two years of intense work, he saw the UN General Assembly adopt the Genocide Convention on December 9, 1948.

Hersch Lauterpacht (1897-1960)

Hersch Lauterpacht was a British-Jewish lawyer of Polish birth who coined the concept of ‘crimes against humanity’. Lauterpacht was part of the British prosecution team at the Nuremberg trials, and played a vital role in defining the crimes with which the perpetrators of the Holocaust would be charged.

His key contribution was developing the legal concept of ‘crimes against humanity’ and ensuring the Nazi leaders were found guilty of these newly-defined crimes. Lauterpacht’s new legal argument demolished the Nazi defendants’ attempted defence that because ‘states couldn’t commit crimes under international law, it followed that the individuals who served them also could not be guilty of crime’.

Between 1955 and 1960, Lauterpacht was the British judge on the International Court of Justice (the judicial arm of the United Nations). This involved resolving disputes between states and giving advisory opinions on international law.

“The state is not an abstract entity… its rights and duties are the rights and duties of men, its actions those of the politicians who should ‘not be able to seek immunity behind the intangible personality of the state.”

Sir Humphrey Shawcross, British prosecutor at Nuremberg, presenting the legal argument written by Lauterpacht.
Post-War Jewish Heroes

Clemens Nathan (1933-2015)

Born in Hamburg, Clemens Nathan came to England in 1936, aged three, as a refugee with his family. On the outbreak of war, Nathan’s father, Kurt, was taken from the family home and interned in a camp for ‘aliens’ from hostile nations. The war was to devastate his wider family who had remained in continental Europe. Germany’s anti-Semitism and intolerance would have a lifelong impact on Nathan.

As a young man, Nathan gave a speech at the Consultative Council of Jewish Organisations (CCJO) about the persecution of Jews in the Soviet Union. After speaking, René Cassin, who had founded the CCJO in 1946, approached Clemens saying, “Young man, I want you to accompany me to meetings at the United Nations. I liked your speech very much.” Shortly thereafter, Nathan became Joint Chair of the CCJO, representing Jewish interests at the United Nations, the Council of Europe and UNESCO.

For over a decade, Nathan’s focus was on the issue of reparations for victims of the Nazi Holocaust. As Board Member for the Claims Conference, he was involved in negotiations with Austria for compensation, particularly for the Kindertransport children, and for old people living in Germany and Austria, ensuring that they had decent accommodation. Nathan tirelessly involved himself in all manner of activities, many of which were concerned with promoting human rights, achieving greater understanding and promoting freedom.

Professor Sir Nigel Rodley (1941-2017)

Born in Yorkshire, Sir Nigel Rodley was one of the founding fathers of the human rights movement. Sir Nigel’s father had arrived in the UK in 1938 as a refugee from Germany, leaving behind many family members who would perish in Nazi concentration camps.

Sir Nigel’s lifelong determination was to preserve and protect the legacy of the Nuremberg trials of 1945-46 by combating human rights violation and abuse of state power.

Sir Nigel was appointed as Amnesty International’s first legal officer, starting in the early 1970s, during which time he helped draft the UN Convention Against Torture. From 1993-2001, he served as United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture. As his work was mainly behind the scenes and did not involve courtroom battles or outspoken advocacy, he has been described as a human rights diplomat.

In 1998 he was knighted for services to human rights and international law.

Notwithstanding his commitments as an academic and a jurist, Nigel supported many human rights organisations. He served on the council of the NGO JUSTICE, and was president of the International Commission of Jurists. He showed a particular interest in Freedom from Torture, an organisation whose policy committee he chaired and through which he met many who had survived torture, some of whom had been liberated as a direct result of his own work.

Sir Nigel was also a member of the René Cassin Advisory Council.
Rabbis Abraham Heschel (1907-1972)

Rabbi Heschel was born in Warsaw to a Chassidic family. After a traditional yeshiva education, Heschel took the unexpected decision to study in Germany, in both the University of Berlin and at the progressive Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, where he was ordained.

In 1938, Heschel was expelled to Poland by the Nazi Government, and then left Poland six weeks before the Germans invaded. By 1940, he had arrived in New York.

Heschel is famous for his scholarship, as he wrote several important theological works. But he was also an important civil rights and anti-war activist in the United States. In 1963, he was introduced to Martin Luther King. Heschel and King would march together in the front rank of the third 1965 Selma to Montgomery march.

Of that march, Heschel would write “Our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.” King would later call Heschel ‘my Rabbi’.

Ray Harmel (née Adler) (1905-1998)

Ray Harmel was a Jewish Anti-Apartheid campaigner and trade union leader. She twice had to flee from the arms of the secret police – first in 1928 from her homeland of Lithuania to South Africa, then in 1963 from South Africa to the United Kingdom. Harmel was a lifelong communist, trade unionist and campaigner against discrimination. She brought the hatred of racist White South Africa upon herself by refusing to countenance the South African Garment Workers’ Union’s pro-segregation policy.

In 1963, following threats on her life and on that of her husband, Michael Harmel, she left South Africa for political exile in the UK. Here, she continued to fight against apartheid, until her death in 1998, after which she was remembered as ‘a fierce fighter, an untiring fighter dedicated to racial equality and the rights of working women’.

Helen Suzman (1917-2009)

Helen Suzman, the South African born daughter of Jewish Eastern European immigrants, was a feminist, human rights and anti-apartheid icon, who lived her life according to the core Jewish belief that individuals should assume responsibility for the wider community.

Suzman was one of 12 MPs who formed South Africa’s Progressive Party in 1959, an openly liberal party which believed in rights and qualified franchise for all. After a 1961 election in which all other Progressive MPs lost their seats, Suzman served as the sole Progressive MP and voice of the oppressed until 1974. Between 1991-3 Suzman acted as the president of the South African Institute for Race Relations, served on the commission overseeing the first democratic elections in 1994 and then became a member of the statutory Human Rights Commission.

Suzman was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and received the United Nations Human Rights Award (1978) and the Medallion of Heroism (1980).
JEWISH HUMAN RIGHTS HEROES

Jewish Human Rights Heroes (Women’s Rights)

Simone Veil (1927-2017)

Simone Veil was a French-born Jew, Holocaust survivor and pioneer of Equal Rights for women. She was born into a Jewish family in Nice and in 1944 she was deported with her sister and mother to Auschwitz and later to Bergen-Belsen.

After the war, she qualified as a lawyer and magistrate, and successfully campaigned to improve the conditions and fate of women prisoners. She was the first woman to be a minister in France and in 1975, as minister of Health, Veil successfully introduced a law that would legalise use of contraception and abortion.

In 1979, Veil was elected as the first President of the European Parliament. She remained a member of that Parliament until 1993, when she re-joined the French Government as Health Minister. There, she led efforts to improve conditions for disadvantaged groups including the disabled, the HIV-positive, and mothers of young children.

The Women’s Campaign for Soviet Jewry (‘the 35s’)

In 1971, news reached Western Europe and the United States that a Russian Jew, Raisa Palatnik of Odessa, who had applied for permission to leave the Soviet Union, had been taken into custody by the Soviet secret police, the KGB. The news triggered mass protests, predominantly led by ordinary Jewish women, mothers and housewives. The organisation they founded, the Women’s Campaign for Soviet Jewry, known more informally as ‘the 35s’ after their founding membership, would become an international force credited by some as contributing to the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

For close to three decades, the 35s campaigned to heighten public awareness of the inhuman denial of freedom of religion and movement to which millions of Jews living in the USSR were subjected.

Other Jewish communities worldwide emulated the British 35s, with the Los Angeles 35s being a particularly impactful sister organisation. The 35s exemplified how people cooperating could achieve seemingly impossible goals. In 1989, the USSR opened the borders for Jews to leave the Soviet Union. Mere months later, the Soviet Union itself collapsed.
Harvey Milk (1930-1978)

Harvey Milk, the child of Jewish Lithuanian parents, was the first openly gay elected official in the history of California – and one of the first in the USA.

Milk was inaugurated as a San Francisco City-County Supervisor in January 1978. During his eleven months in office, he was responsible for passing a San Francisco ordinance that outlawed discrimination based on sexual orientation. Milk also took part in successfully opposing a California ballot initiative to mandate the firing of gay teachers.

Milk received daily death threats, but continued undaunted in his pursuit of gay rights until his tragic assassination in November 1978. In a taped version of his will, recorded in the event of assassination, Milk declared that “if a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door”.

Walter Caplan, who hosted the Seder which Milk attended every year, said Milk’s Judaism was “a cornerstone of who he was and everything that he did. Harvey fought for the underdog and he was a scrappy fighter and believed very much in social justice. Everywhere he saw something wrong, he wanted to fix it. I think he had the values that he got at Hebrew school and at the dinner table.”

Adam Wagner

Adam is a British, Jewish human rights barrister, blogger and activist. In 2010, Adam founded the UK Human Rights Blog, which provides a free, comprehensive and balanced legal view on a wide range of legal issues relating to human rights. The blog is now maintained by members of the barristers’ chambers at 1 Crown Office Row.

In 2015, Adam founded the charity RightsInfo, which builds knowledge and support for human rights in the UK by producing engaging, accessible and beautifully-presented online human rights content. Every week, over one million people access the infographics, stories, videos and explainers produced by the charity.
**FACTS & FIGURES**

**GENOCIDES SINCE ‘THE HOLOCAUST’**
Since the world declared ‘Never Again!’ to Nazi Holocaust of 1939-1945, there have been nine other Genocides.

- Cambodia 1975-1979
- Bangladesh 1975
- East Timor 1975-1999
- Guatemala 1981-83
- Rwanda 1990
- Bosnia 1992-1995
- Darfur, Sudan 2004-ongoing
- Yazidi, Iraq 2014
- Rohingya, Myanmar 2018

**SYNAGOGUES PARTICIPATING IN HUMAN RIGHTS SHABBAT**

- 2014
- 2016

**FACTS & FIGURES**

**HUMAN RIGHTS HISTORY – KEY DATES**

- England: Magna Carta
- Talmud
- Jerusalem
- Mishna & Midrash
- England: Bill of Rights
- USA: Bill of Rights
- British Empire abolishes slavery
- France: Declaration on the Rights of Man and Citizen
- The Final Act of the Congress of Vienna declaring slavery “repugnant to the principles of humanity and universal morality”
- The First Geneva Convention provides for the humane treatment of wounded soldiers

**Five books of Moses**
- c.1200 BCE
- c.700 BCE
- c.500 CE
- c.600 CE
- c.1200 CE

**Isaiah**
- c.700 BCE
- c.500 CE
- c.600 CE

**Jeremiah**
- c.500 CE
- c.600 CE
- c.1200 CE

**Mishna & Midrash**
- c.500 CE
- c.600 CE
- c.1200 CE

**Talmud**
- c.500 CE
- c.600 CE
- c.1200 CE

**Maimonides**
- c.600 CE
- c.1200 CE

**England: Bill of Rights**
- 1689

**USA: Bill of Rights**
- 1789

**British Empire abolishes slavery**
- 1815

**British Empire abolishes slavery**
- 1833

**British Empire abolishes slavery**
- 1864
HOW OFTEN ‘STRANGER’ IS MENTIONED IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Genesis: 2
Exodus: 12
Leviticus: 21
Numbers: 11
Deuteronomy: 22
Histories (Ketuvim): 13
Prophets (Nevi‘im): 11

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF SLAVES IN THE UK IN 2015
13,000

USA abolishes slavery

FACTS & FIGURES

HOW OFTEN ‘STRANGER’ IS MENTIONED IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Histories (Ketuvim)
Prophets (Nevi‘im)

1865
1920
1945
1949
1950
1951
1966/1976
1966/1976
1998

USA abolishes slavery

Foundation of League of Nations

Foundation of United Nations

Nuremberg trials establish the existence of Crimes Against Humanity

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide comes into law

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (adopted 1966, came into law 1976)


Creation of European Convention on Human Rights

Creation of the ICC through the international criminal court
We celebrate the timeless and universal nature of human rights laws and protections, which were shaped by the distinctive values and experiences of the Jewish people. In particular, we work to preserve and further the legacy of our namesake, Monsieur René Cassin, to the development of contemporary human rights principles in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Our Vision

René Cassin’s vision is of a world where everyone fully enjoys all their human rights as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in which members of the Jewish community are actively engaged in promoting and protecting these rights.

Our Mission

Our mission is to promote and protect the universal rights of all people, drawing on Jewish experience and values. We aim to:

Remake a compelling case for human rights values
Campaign for change in defined human rights areas
Lead and grow a group of committed Jewish human rights advocates
Maximise our capacity to work effectively

Our Values

Our values underpin all the work we do:

Solidarity
Human rights belong to us all, so we stand for the rights of everyone, everywhere

Judaism
We are inspired by Jewish values and experience

Collaboration
Our work is not isolated, but intertwined with the efforts of others, so we nurture and mobilise relationships

Empowerment
We turn today’s Jewish activists into tomorrow’s leaders

Monsieur René Cassin
We are determined to create a legacy worthy of our namesake

How We Work

We progress towards our goals through:

Lobbying and advocacy
Empowering individuals and groups
Mobilising volunteers in and alongside the Jewish community
Forming strong partnerships with organisations and communities that share our goals and values
Human rights are at risk

Human rights are under threat. The post-war consensus that human rights are an essential bulwark protecting individuals and minorities from the overarching state – reached in reaction to the abuses of Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union – is now fracturing.

Populist nationalism is on the rise – and human rights, as a liberal and internationalist project, are increasingly viewed with indifference or antagonism. Principles that have been hard fought for and which had appeared firmly entrenched are now being questioned and attacked. It seems that the system of human rights protections, largely rooted in the Jewish experience in Europe from 1933-45, is being casually discarded.

In 2018, as we celebrate the 70th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there has never been a greater need for a strong Jewish advocate, actor and partner making the case for the contemporary importance of human rights values and protection.

There has never been a more important time to get involved in our work.
Our Campaigns for Change

Modern Day Slavery

Discrimination and Minority Rights
Asylum and Detention

Safeguarding the Future of Human Rights

Photo: Two girls wearing banners with slogan “ABOLISH CHILD SLAVERY!!” in English and Yiddish. Probably taken during May 1, 1909 labour parade in New York City.
As survivors of slavery in Egypt and in Nazi Europe, the Jewish community has a powerful voice in raising awareness of modern day slavery, and in helping those affected.

Someone is in slavery if:

- They are forced to work – through mental or physical threat
- They are owned or controlled by an ‘employer’, usually through mental or physical abuse or the threat of abuse
- They are dehumanised, treated as a commodity or bought and sold as ‘property’
- They are physically constrained or have restrictions placed on their freedom of movement.

Modern slavery exists in many forms – including forced labour, forced marriage and human trafficking. There are over 40 million people in modern day slavery around the world. In the United Kingdom, the Home Office estimates that 13,000 people are victims of slavery or trafficking (however the number estimated by civil society organisations is close to 100,000).

In 2015 the UK passed the Modern Slavery Act (MSA). Provisions within the Act include an increase in maximum sentences for trafficking offenders, assured protection for victims and the establishment of the UK’s first Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner.

However, there is wider sector agreement that the Act needs ‘to put victims at the heart of everything we do’ and ensure a longer support system for victims of modern day slavery.

‘The foundations of Jewish belief stand on the principle that all people are created in the image of God and every single person, deserves to be treated with respect. Speaking out against the flagrant violations of human dignity implicit in this crime, should be in our DNA.’

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

‘This is the gravest human rights issue of our time’

Prime Minister Theresa May

René Cassin campaigns for the implementation of a long-term and holistic support system for survivors of modern day slavery and human trafficking. We call for a smarter, more humane treatment for those victims who come forward and, where necessary, for them to be given greater rights.

‘René Cassin – a voice in Parliament’

We and our partners have argued that the provisions of the MSA, though welcome, do not go far enough, and urge government to extend the specialist support provided for victims from 45 days to 12 months. 45 days is far too short a time for victims to recover from the brutalising and dehumanising conditions that most have experienced.
René Cassin has made several submissions to Parliament, presenting evidence that the MSA is not working as it should. We have shown that immigration regulations often take priority over the victims’ rights to support from the MSA. This was the focus of our case in our submission to the Home Affairs Select Committee consultation on slavery as well as the Parliamentary consultation initiated by Frank Fields MP in 2018.

Awareness in the Jewish community

National campaigns by our partners are creating awareness across the UK. We have been working hard to support these efforts by tailoring national messages to the Jewish community. We have talked to pupils at Jewish schools and to communities in synagogues. We dedicated our Human Rights Shabbat in both 2016 and 2017 to the issue of modern day slavery and published a resource pack for Rabbis and community leaders to reference in their sermons and newsletters. We regularly mobilise our supporters and members of the Jewish community to raise awareness of modern day slavery with their MPs, especially in advance of Parliamentary debates.

With our guide for small and medium business designed to ensure compliance with anti-slavery best practice in supply chains, we encourage businesses to commit to tackling modern day slavery.

Inspiring our youth in the fight against slavery

The issue of slavery is one which motivates our community’s youth. We received many excellent, thoughtful and moving responses to our 2017 essay competition, judged by legal journalist Joshua Rozenberg, which was devoted to the issue of modern day slavery. Two of the winners became volunteer activists dedicated to addressing the issue of slavery.

René Cassin and the Chief Rabbi

In 2017, we introduced Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis to Kevin Hyland, the UK’s first Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. Together with the Chief Rabbi, we communicated the Jewish community’s horror at the re-emergence of slavery in our times. In an article he later published, the Chief Rabbi issued a call to arms to the UK Jewish community, arguing that ‘slavery demands our urgent attention’.

‘Together with René Cassin, we fundraised for the Snowdrop Project, a charity based in Sheffield, which provides long-term, community support to empower survivors of human trafficking. RSY-Netzer is so proud of the £350 raised to support survivors of human trafficking. Crucial to our movement’s ideology is the importance of Tikkun Olam- repairing the world. Improving the lives of victims of human trafficking in the UK allows us to start locally and extend ourselves beyond.’

Lara Glantz, Movement worker for RSY-Netzer
Throughout history, the ability to seek refuge has been essential to Jewish survival. However, in the UK today, those seeking refuge can be indefinitely locked up in immigration detention centres in a system which is inhumane, unjust and ineffective. René Cassin argues for a time limit on immigration detention and makes the case for alternatives to detention, which could improve the lives of detainees, and make the system operate more effectively and with less cost.

René Cassin is an integral part of the nationwide Detention Forum, which campaigns for the introduction of a 28-day time limit on immigration detention. Detention Forum have acknowledged that we have brought, uniquely, both a strong Jewish voice for reform in immigration detention and a powerful interfaith unity on the issue.

René Cassin welcomed Bishops, Imams and Rabbis to our ‘Interfaith Tent’ outside Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre as part of the national ‘Time for a Time Limit’ campaign. The united interfaith call for reform which emerged from this gathering of faith leaders received coverage in the national press.

Comparing Jewish and non-Jewish experiences of detention

René Cassin takes responsibility for telling the stories of those held in the dehumanising immigration detention system. We have shared the stories of recent Jewish refugees and migrants to the UK, including ‘Yuri’, who was given leave to remain in Britain only after thirteen years and eight court cases, and Amir Siman-Tov, who sadly died in detention.

Their stories exemplify experiences suffered every year by over 30,000 immigration detainees in one of the UK’s 10 immigration detention centres.

We often bring together Jewish and non-Jewish migrants to share their experiences of indefinite detention at the hands of the UK Government. Berlin-born Fritz Lustig, a Jewish internee in 1940, spoke alongside our partners Detention Action and Freed Voices UK at Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue’s Mitzvah day event.
Together, those speaking had cumulatively lost over 20 years in UK immigration detention centres.

We have also shared the stories of Yuri, Amir, Fritz, and the thousands of contemporary migrants and refugees to the UK to show the human reality that lies behind the statistics.

**Our lobbying and advocacy**

For many years now, René Cassin has presented Government and Parliament with the case for a more humane asylum system. Our primary concern is to advocate for a 28-day limit on immigration detention. We have participated in every significant Parliamentary and Government consultation of the past few years, most notably the 2015 All Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees’ report into immigration, and the Government’s Shaw Reviews of 2015 and 2018.

The evidence we present is informed by our Jewish experience of immigration. As well as our historic experience as refugees from discrimination or persecution, we also report on the insights of many synagogues in supporting refugees seeking asylum in the UK. These may consist of the spiritual insight of leading Rabbis and lay leaders, or of oral evidence gathered first hand from ex-detainees using synagogue-based drop-in centres for refugees and ex-detainees.

Immigration was one of the most contentious issues in the campaigns ahead of the 2016 Brexit referendum and remained a core issue during the 2017 General Election.

René Cassin produced an analysis of the main political parties’ views on immigration, and suggested questions on immigration policy that our volunteers and supporters might ask their candidates.

**A ‘key for freedom’ on the Seder plate – mobilising the Jewish community**

We have found the Jewish community strongly supportive of our work on behalf of asylum seekers and migrants.

In 2016, many René Cassin supporters placed ‘a key for freedom’ on their Seder plates in sympathy with those detained in immigration detention centres. Later that year, we co-ran a whole-day learning and discussion track on refugee and asylum issues at Limmud and Young Limmud. René Cassin brought Rabbis, in advance of writing their Pesach sermons, to visit detainees held in the Government’s main detention centres. We introduced them to detainees, including some that have been held in indefinite detention for over a decade.

Our campaign inspired Sophie Shall, one of our Fellowship Programme participants, to set up a Jewish Visitors Group to work alongside other UK volunteer visitors’ groups. This complemented our earlier work in partnership with Right to Remain for volunteers and professionals who wanted to learn about the UK asylum system.
Mobilising on Hate Crime

The Jewish community knows from first-hand experience the corrosive effect of casual and embedded prejudice. We have learnt the bitter lesson that such intolerance must be challenged and tackled before it becomes normalised and leads to institutional discrimination or worse.

Sadly, we are living in a time when hate crime is on the rise. This is an issue which affects many groups in the UK. As well as hatred towards Jews, recent years have seen an uptake in hate directed against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities, alongside other forms of hate towards Muslims, the disabled and LGBTI people.

Standing in Solidarity with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities

The estimated 150,000 to 300,000 Gypsies, Roma and Travellers who live in the UK today do not enjoy the same acceptance that Jews do. They are one of the most marginalised and discriminated against ethnic minorities.

Along with the Jews, the Romani Gypsies were the only other ethnic minority targeted by Nazis for extermination. Of the intended destruction of the Romani community, one high-ranking Nazi official stated, “In the same way as the National Socialist state has solved the Jewish question, it will also have to settle the Gypsy question once and for all.”

However, the Roma Holocaust is increasingly at risk of being ignored or forgotten. Every year, therefore, René Cassin assembles Rabbis, lay leaders and other members of the Jewish community to join in the commemoration of the Roma Holocaust, which takes place on the 2nd of August.

In a series of seminars, we brought together faith leaders from different religious groups and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller campaign organisations, raising awareness on the particular aspect of discrimination and prejudice experienced by these communities.

“This is a brilliant way of putting the spotlight on the work that faith groups do daily across the country, and recognising those who have been at the heart of making a difference in their communities.”

Prime Minister David Cameron
Our pioneering work on countering the racism and discrimination faced by the UK’s Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities won René Cassin a 2014 ‘Together in Service’ award and the commendation of the Prime Minister.

Mobilising the Jewish Community

In its 2017 manifesto, the Board of Deputies has included commitments to tackle discrimination and prejudice against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. These commitments were the result of many years of dialogue and relationship building between the leaders of the Jewish and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, facilitated by René Cassin.

Both communities recognised that we share common issues around racism and hate and agreed to support each other’s strategies to promote human rights, peace building and resilience.

“We believe that there can be no human rights for anyone unless they are accorded to all. We particularly support groups whose human rights are neglected or withheld. Therefore, we stand in solidarity with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) community today, and every day, which continues to be subject to adverse discrimination and faces multiple disadvantages, such as with regards to education, health, the workplace and the justice system.”

Ruth Barnett, Kindertransport refugee, speaking for René Cassin

Affecting policy

René Cassin has taken part in, and influenced, several recent parliamentary and governmental consultations addressing issues of discrimination and hate crime. Notably, in 2017, we contributed to to the Parliamentary Women and Equality Select Committee, and in 2018 we submitted a report to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hate Crime.

The Government does pay attention to our submissions. In 2016, together with partners, we brought to the Government’s attention the need to record Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in ethnic monitoring processes – a vital step in understanding why Gypsy, Roma and Traveller youth are over-represented in the youth criminal justice system. In 2017, the Government committed to making this change and to rolling it out in 2018.
Modern human rights laws are the direct result of the civilised world’s response to the horrors of the Holocaust. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the European Convention on Human Rights were both drawn up to say, ‘Never Again!’ and to protect people from oppressive governments.

Defending this legacy requires more than just campaigning on individual human rights issues. For without an understanding of the values that underpin the human rights framework, the victories of the past seven decades will constantly be at risk.

René Cassin is committed to remaking the case for human rights and values with all the people, leaders, communities and national institutions whom we meet. The human rights legacy bequeathed to us by the generation who survived the Second World War and Holocaust needs constant reinvigoration within the Jewish community and within the broader public sphere. This is a mission we proudly undertake.

Reinvigorating Human Rights through our partnerships

René Cassin has worked across the institutions of the Jewish community to create support for human rights. We have seen human rights become part of the official language of the Board of Deputies, leading Jewish newspapers, Rabbis and communities.

We have also ensured that the voice of the Jewish community has been heard in the national and international institutions charged with interpreting, defending and legislating for human rights. We have presented the Jewish case for human rights to the UK Government and, notably, to the United Nations 2017 Periodic Review of Human Rights in the UK.

We are also members of UK’s most important human rights advocacy group – the Human Rights Alliance – and ensure that its lobbying and advocacy of Government on this issue is always informed by our community’s experiences and values.

‘The European Convention on Human Rights, on which the Human Rights Act is based, was Europe’s response to the horror of the Holocaust. As leaders and members within the Jewish community, we would oppose any attempt to water down a document that gives practical expression to the idea that all people deserve to be treated with dignity and receive equal access to justice.’

Letter signed by 50 Rabbis to the Justice Secretary
Mobilising the Jewish community to defend Human Rights

Our efforts to date have shown that the UK’s Jewish community retains a huge interest in and passion for the post-war framework of universal human rights. We regularly ask lay leaders and Rabbis to join in support of our campaign, reminding the government about the need to put this country at the forefront of protecting and promoting human rights, through keeping the UK’s Human Rights Act and our continued commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights.

To bring the threat to our post-War human rights legacy to a wider audience, we have run a series of public lectures, panel discussions and discussion forums. Very often, we have had to move our event to a larger venue to cope with sell-out crowds. These events have seen some of the UK’s most distinguished supporters of human rights articulating both the threat to universal human rights, and the importance of preserving them.

Our annual Human Rights Shabbat helps us raise awareness of human rights and contemporary human rights issues in synagogues, youth groups and other community organisations around the country. Human Rights Shabbat takes place on the closest Shabbat to International Human Rights Day on 10th December. We provide programming, speakers and resources so that at least one day each year, Jewish communities celebrate human rights.

Left: Panel debate on the HRA @Marek Dabrowski
Top: Screening of the film Sunrise, Not Sunset for the 20th anniversary of the Human Rights Act (1998) and how “it helps the ordinary people”
Right: René Cassin Parashot Project – Human Rights Thought for the Week
Future
Growing the Next Generation of Jewish Human Rights Activists in the UK

One of our core objectives is to develop the next generation of Jewish human rights activists. We do this by providing our young and passionate supporters with the inspiration, knowledge, and skills that empower them to defend and evolve universal human rights in the future.

Partly, this is about informing and raising awareness in schools, youth groups, and communities via our annual Human Rights Shabbat. It is also about making ourselves open to young people (Jewish and non-Jewish) at every stage – from bnei mitzvah to secondary school students experiencing work for the first time, to university students and graduates who intern with us. Everyone involved does real work on real issues – not ‘just the photocopying’ and tea runs.

The centrepiece of our activity is our Fellowship Programme (supported by the AJA), which brings together a cohort of exceptional professionals to explore human rights issues through a unique Jewish lens. The programme is designed to broaden the understanding of human rights principles and Jewish visions of a just society through the study of Jewish experience and values and of contemporary international human rights issues.

This is then harnessed to create a movement of Jewish social activists, who will be equipped with the knowledge and skills to promote social justice and human rights in the UK.

“The Fellowship Programme opened my eyes to a whole variety of human rights issues. Throughout this process I have been continually challenged to think about these in a Jewish context and consider the multitude of ways that solidarity is a Jewish value.”

Sophie Shall, 2017 Fellow
“A pivotal moment in my life... from the moment I stepped into the office I was made part of the René Cassin team. I was given work that I felt was valuable and allowed me to simultaneously help the cause, but also to absorb knowledge and open my eyes to the reality of the world around me.”

Hilary Trimarchi, Work Experience 2018

The legacy we leave to the next generation

Today’s modern human rights framework is the legacy of the vision and contribution of our namesake Monsieur René Cassin and other Jewish human rights heroes. To preserve this legacy, we invest in the next generation, ensuring that we too leave a legacy – a cohort of empowered activist, committed to human rights.
Human rights are innate to Jewish values and to the collective Jewish experience. From our earliest experiences as a people, the values of justice, freedom and equality have been part of what it means to be Jewish.

Our Jewish experience, and specifically the Holocaust, signified the need for a codified set of principles to underpin the international community’s shared understanding and commitment that the horrors that affected so many individuals, families and groups in the Second World War must never happen again.

For many of us, the resulting human rights framework has defined who we are and how we live our lives. So much so that many of us take for granted that the rights and protections that come from this legal framework and close our eyes to the many abuses of these rights that happen in our society and abroad.

As we today celebrate and benefit from this human rights legacy, we must ask ourselves, what will our human rights legacy be for the future? How will we ensure that human rights are enjoyed by everyone?

As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights turns 70, please support René Cassin’s work to promote and protect the Declaration’s vision for a world of freedom, justice and peace.

Left: Eleanor Roosevelt, 10th December 1948
Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighbourhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerned citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

Eleanor Roosevelt, 1958
We rely on the generosity of our supporters for the funds to continue our vital work. You can make a one-off or regular donation to René Cassin via our website at renecassin.org/donate, or we can help you set up a donation by phone on 020 3621 5464.

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