

Freiburg: Online Lehrhaus in the tradition of Freiburg's pre-Shoah Jewish community

On Sunday, May 24, 2020, Freiburg's reform congregation, the Egalitarian Chavurah Gescher, offered more than eight hours of non-stop Jewish learning for all interested parties. Participants from across Germany as well as from the Netherlands, Switzerland, and France were in attendance. Nearly 80 people from Flensburg to Basel and from Mulhouse to Augsburg enjoyed a total of seven sessions at which a wide range of Jewish topics and perspectives were presented. Each session was attended by some 45 participants and consisted of a lecture followed by a discussion period. The opening event at 10 a.m., a Shacharit (morning) service that marked the beginning of the Jewish month of Sivan, was led by Rabbi Dr. Ulrike Offenberg (Reform Jewish Community of Hamelin) and cantor and rabbinical student Dr. Annette Böckler (currently serving Chavurah Gescher in Freiburg). At the end of the long day, everyone was rewarded with a concert featuring Nikola David, cantor of the Munich congregation Beth Shalom. Accompanied by piano or accordion, Nikola David, who is also active in Stuttgart, performed liturgical music as well as songs in Yiddish and Ladino that highlighted the rich heritage of various Jewish cultures.

The first session after the service, given by Rabbi Prof. Dr. Elisa Klapheck of Frankfurt, offered a closer look at the principle "dina de malchuta dina" (the law of the land is the law), a foundation of Jewish life in the diaspora from antiquity to the present day. Today, "the land" as referred to in the principle is defined more precisely as a state governed by the rule of law. Already the first Jewish interpreters of law worked to develop a form of state in which, on the one hand, no single religion could become the official state religion, thus laying the foundation for the separation of religion and the secular state, and, on the other hand, a form of state in which freedom of religion was guaranteed. In addition to her rabbinical duties in Frankfurt's Egalitarian Minyan, Rabbi Klapheck is a professor at the University of Paderborn.

This was followed by another session devoted to a fundamental legal issue. "Property entails obligations" was presented by Abraham de Wolf, a lawyer from Frankfurt and a board member of the association Torat HaKalkala, an organization that addresses Jewish social ethics in the economic sector and publishes regularly on current economic policy issues. Abraham de Wolf also sits on the national board of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft jüdischer Sozialdemokratinnen und Sozialdemokraten (Working Group of Jewish Social Democrats). The discussion that followed was devoted not only to the main substance of the lecture but also to the connection between work and human dignity and to questions concerning the idea of introducing an unconditional basic income (which was controversially discussed) as well as to the right to be able to earn one's own living.

At 1 p.m. Rabbi Dr. Ulrike Offenberg spearheaded a discussion on the difficult relationship between majority and minority positions, asking whether a simple majority decision must always be the best or only solution. The title of the session, "What jumping trees and collapsing walls can tell us about democratic culture", was a reference to an early 2nd century Talmudic dispute involving the so-called Oven of Akhnai (oven of serpents). It seems that some social issues are not entirely new, and we can still learn today from the debates they inspired in antiquity.

In the next session, Rabbi Dr. Walter Rothschild, Berlin, gave a historical overview of the land of Israel from antiquity to the 20th century. Rabbi Rothschild, who has provided valuable support to numerous reform congregations in Germany since their founding in the 1990s, currently serves a congregation in Warsaw. In addition to publishing regularly on Jewish issues, he has written several crime novels. Periodically, he takes to the road as a comedian, an activity that enables him to present the complexity of Jewish life – both within the Jewish world and in society as a whole – in a different way.

Subsequently, writer Lena Gorelik of Munich, who recently gave a reading of her work for Gescher, read from her book "Mehr Schwarz als Lila" (More Black than Purple), a young adult novel that speaks to young and old alike. The book, which deals with the culture of remembrance and addresses young people separated from the Shoah and the Nazi era by four generations, was nominated in 2018 for the prestigious German Prize for Youth Literature. Born in St. Petersburg, Lena Gorelik came to Germany with her family in 1992. In addition to novels, she regularly writes essays and reports for such media outlets as DIE ZEIT, the Süddeutsche Zeitung, and Deutschlandradio. Her debut novel, "Meine weissen Nächte" (My White Nights), published in 2004 brought her both critical and popular acclaim.

Beginning at 4 p.m., the language switched to English. The floor was taken by Anat Hoffman, executive director of the Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC, the public and legal advocacy arm of the reform movement in Israel) and director and founding member of Women of the Wall (WOW, an international Jewish women's – and men's – group devoted to fighting for the right of women to pray and read from the Torah, collectively and aloud, at the Western Wall in Jerusalem). Equality of men and women in public prayer services is the rule in all reform movements, and these movements represent a clear majority of Jewish life worldwide. An essential element of the religious discussion is the question of whether it is permissible to limit access to the DIVINE to one sex and, from this, to derive – directly or indirectly – rules of conduct that cannot, as such, be derived from the sacred texts that are the foundation upon which all denominations are based.

The final session, "Kawanah und Corona" (Kavana and Corona) focused on the current situation in the world, namely, living with the corona virus, a circumstance that occupies the Jewish community and groups to the same extent as it does the rest of society. After an introductory overview, Dr. Annette Böckler opened the floor for participants to discuss the positive side effects of life with the new virus – such as this online Lehrhaus, which would hardly have been possible without a lockdown. She also provided crucial technical support to presenters and participants alike throughout the entire event.

Freiburg's reform congregation, the Egalitarian Chavurah Gescher, was extremely satisfied with the day, as expectations were more than fulfilled. Only a few days before, the community had learned that by offering a Lehrhaus they were perpetuating a Freiburg tradition. Already in January 1933, the predominantly reform Jewish community in Freiburg established a Lehrhaus (as did many other communities in Germany before the Shoah) in order to be able to face the expected difficult times with the inner strength and solidarity that flows from communal learning.

"We see only one last possibility to overcome the danger and that is the permeating of each and every individual Jew with the power that has been triggered in all times of need by our Jewish outlook and teachings concerning the nature and being of the world - God - and of human beings. In this time of general confusion and distress, it is a duty, especially as far as Jewish youth is concerned, to give active, positive values from the rich Jewish history and culture". Quoted from the founding documents of the Lehrhaus of the Freiburg Jewish community in January 1933 (Kathrin Clausing, "Leben auf Abruf". Freiburg 2005, p. 277), this idea is still relevant, even if the times are not comparable, as Jewish communities and groups today are once again facing growing threats to their security.