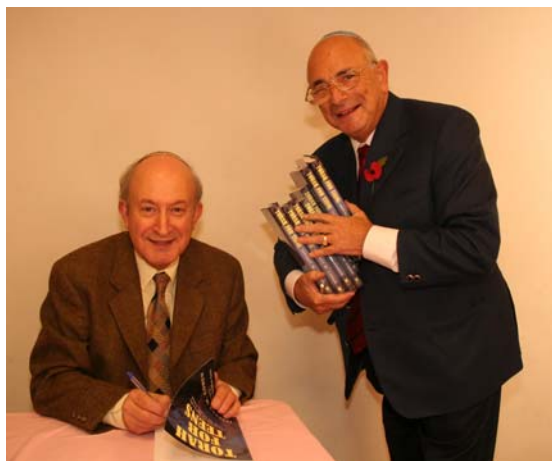


Torah For Teens Torah For Teens

**Book Launch of "Torah For Teens" by Rabbi Dr. Jeffrey Cohen
at Stanmore and Canons Park Synagogue Sunday 4th November 2007**



At the outset I offer my sincere thanks to Rabbi Mendel Lew, Rabbi Andrew Shaw and the HE's of Stanmore for hosting this book launch, and especially to my very dear friend, Ronnie, for having overseen all the arrangements. Notwithstanding his indisposition, which, please God, will be very temporary, his enthusiasm and vigour has not waned, and the encouragement and support that he gave me throughout my ministry at Stanmore has clearly not abated on my retirement. Ronnie, thank you for everything. I also thank the ladies who have so kindly come out this morning to prepare the refreshments.



At this stage I would like to mention someone whom I would so dearly have wished to have been present to receive my appreciation, but, alas, the Almighty determined otherwise. I refer, of course, to Mr Frank Cass, whose decision it was to publish this book, and who also mooted the publication of a new edition of my *1001 Q's and A's on Pesach* and my *1001 Q's and A's on R.H. & Y.K.* Frank was a colourful, friendly, engaging, larger than life character, with a great sense of humour, a man possessed of great wisdom and diplomacy, a man whose greatest desire was to encourage fledgling writers and scholars by giving them their first opportunity to publish, to reach a wide readership, and to make their reputation. He also helped in the establishment of some entirely new areas of academic study by publishing journals devoted to their analysis. Frank is profoundly missed, and I deem it a great honour and source of pleasure to see Audrey here this morning, and, of course, Stewart (and Rachel and Hayley). We wish all the family 'long life,' and success in helping to perpetuate Frank's memory and his life's mission by maintaining and expanding the horizons of their distinguished Vallentine Mitchell Publishing House.

In this context, I also thank Mr Toby Harris of Vallentine Mitchell who oversees the sales and distribution of the book, and who shleps out on cold evenings and weekends to set out the stalls for the various book launches.

Having concluded the acknowledgments, may I say how wonderful it is for Gloria and me to be back in the hub of this wonderful community, surrounded by so many old, cherished and sorely missed friends. It is most appropriate for me to be launching in this Synagogue which will always hold a place of honour in our hearts and very fond memories of twenty happy and creative years in its service. Its members were always responsive to my ideas and inspired me to give of my best.

Indeed this community can claim much of the credit for this publication, since a great proportion of the book began as addresses delivered from its pulpit. I acknowledge this in my Introduction, in these words: 'And that is why I have put together this book, comprising messages that I have delivered to young people in my former Stanmore & Canons Park community, over the past twenty years. This remains the largest Orthodox community in Europe, teeming with teens from whom I have also learned something about the

changing patterns of life, and to whom I hope I have taught much about the Torah way of life.'

While mentioning gratitude, and in the spirit of the rabbinic principle of *acharon acharon chaviv*, we leave the most important to the end, I must also thank Gloria, my keenest critic, support and inspiration in everything I have written and done, and who continues to criticise...er, no, I mean continues to support and inspire .



They say that either adversity or total contentment provide the ideal conditions within which to write creatively. I thank God for my wonderful family that has always provided the joy and sense of pride and fulfilment that was an ideal launching pad for my literary and spiritual quests. I have to thank my grandchildren in particular for providing me with the qualifications and context for presuming, at my age, to write a book for young people. Without them I could claim no contact with, or experience of, that age group.

Notwithstanding its title, *Torah for Teens* was written, *bin'ureinu uvizkeineinu*, with our young adults, but also with the older generation, in mind. It may seem a rather ambitiously broad span, but there are texts in every literature that are profitably read and analysed by all ages at different levels.

Without wishing to make any invidious comparisons, but books like Orwell's *1984* or Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, can be read at many levels. A student or adult will naturally bring to it a greater wealth of personal life-experience, and thus extract more from it, but that does not mean that it will

not entertain, inspire and instruct the younger age group, or be a stimulus for its own imagination and spiritual quest.

If it wasn't for Rambam, in chapter 33 of his *Guide for the Perplexed*, I would not have the temerity to say that the same applies to the Torah's narrative itself. In that work Rambam strongly adduces the talmudic principle, *Dibra Torah bilshon b'nei adam*, of 'the Torah employing the language of ordinary folk,' and using allegorical or figurative descriptions to convey its sublime and eternal truths. Hence, says Rambam, 'The Torah's (primary) objective was to (appeal to, and) serve for the instruction of, the young...and the common people' (Friedlander ed., Pt 1, ch.33).

So, if the Torah itself presented its narrative in a manner that the younger generation might enjoy and comprehend at their level, and the older generation interpret more profoundly, you will understand why I entertain the belief that one can write a book that will speak to the youth, and help prepare them for a committed Jewish adulthood, while at the same time inspiring and providing much food for thought and discussion within the older age group. The Chief Rabbi, who graciously provided the Foreword for the book, encourages me to believe that I have struck that balance when he writes "I recommend this work to everyone, not just teens. Each of us will find in it something new and arresting. Certainly I have."



In addition to writing a piece on every sidrah, I also cover all the festivals and disclose the valuable teachings inherent in their rich symbolism. I also include messages from the hobbies, sports and interests which so many young people enjoy, and which I believe can also be a useful source of religious analogy. I

trust that Stanmore members haven't yet forgotten how I always tried to make my address to the young people on their Bar or Bat Mitzvah directly and powerfully relevant to their own interests and experiences. This again is inherent in the challenge of Torah as an *Eitz chayyim*, a tree of life. Religion and life cannot be separated, and Torah has something valuable to say and to contribute to every experience of life, be it war, peace, love, marriage, family, sickness, business, sport, violence, and so on. It also means that every aspect of life - its arts, its music, its literature, its science, its aesthetics and its technology – must all be viewed as a divinely-bestowed creativity. The ideal has to be, therefore, that synthesis of Torah and life, spirituality and modernity, that is the hallmark of a concept that, alas, has largely been discredited in recent decades, namely that of Modern Orthodoxy. My book promotes this philosophy vigorously and unashamedly.

My first reviewer, who, although extremely complimentary, yet took me to task - as was his prerogative - for telling my young readers to acknowledge the spiritual debt they owed to their local centrist communities for having provided their early education and nurtured their spirituality and sense of religious identity, as well as for the social facilities provided, and not to defect, therefore, to separatist *Charedi* enclaves. He objected, and stated that young people must be given the freedom to choose their own religious affiliation which I should not have attempted to influence. My answer is to ask, why the Charedim are permitted to be the only ones to practise outreach. I also demand the right to set up my stall, and canvas for Modern Orthodoxy, and especially to affirm the necessity of loyalty to their family tradition. *Zacharti lakh chesed ne'urayikh*, 'I remember unto you the kindness of your youth.'

I hope this book will help parents discuss Torah with their children around the Shabbat table, and teachers with their pupils.

I attempt to provide a moral compass for our young people on a host of issues, either of immediate concern or related to situations that they will inevitably encounter during their succeeding years. Among these subjects are, their sense of 'self,' their Jewish identity, morality, friendship and relationships, temptation, marriage, role-models, tolerance, success, wealth, contentment, spiritual values, maturity, disability, community service, commitment to the State of Israel, the idea of chosenness, violence and anti-

Semitism, campus tensions, cruelty to animals, terrorism, control of their emotions, goodness and deviance, loyalty and disloyalty, gratitude and ingratitude, success and failure, hopes raised and dashed, functional and dysfunctional families, brotherly love and brotherly rivalry. All human life is in the Torah: Life in the raw; life as it should be lead, and as it is not lead, the lives of saints and of sinners, of those struggling to lead constructive lives and of those bent on exploiting others. My book attempts to discuss and unravel many of those issues and to convince our youth that the sidrah of the week is far from boring, but, on the contrary, is an inspirational, multi-layered text, a store-house of ideas, variant interpretations, inferences, parallels with modern situations and contemporary dilemmas, a text that speaks to the heart of every age group, in every situation, and which can guide them far better than any agony aunt in *Hello!* Or *O.K!*

I thank you all for attending this launch and for your interest in the project, and I hope that *Torah for Teens* will make a worthy contribution to the religious development of our younger generation, as well as the not so young.

