

Clergy Discipline Measure 2003

In the Clergy Discipline Tribunal – Diocese of Winchester

Re the Reverend Dr Stephen Robert Sizer

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF
ROBERT COHEN**

I, **ROBERT COHEN**,

WILL SAY as follows:

1. I make this statement on behalf of the Reverend Dr Stephen Sizer in support of his Answer to a Complaint made against him by the Board of Deputies of British Jews (“**the Board of Deputies**”).

Biography

2. Of particular relevance to this dispute, I am a British Jew brought up in the Movement for Reform Judaism where I was inspired by Hebrew Scripture and my study of Jewish history to value the importance of building a just society and working to “*repair the fractured world*” in which we live. I am also a trustee of Amos Trust, which has thirty years of experience working in Israel/Palestine; and I am married to an Anglican Priest, Revd Anne Russell, a Team Rector in the Leeds Diocese.
3. For the last ten years I have written and spoken publicly about my criticism of Zionism and the actions of the State of Israel in its treatment of the Palestinian people. I write not from a secular or left-wing position but from an understanding of what it should mean to be a Jew in the 21st century in the long shadow of the Holocaust and following the creation of the State of Israel. I take my inspiration from the Hebrew Prophets, from the experience of the Jewish people throughout the Jewish diaspora and from the ethical teachings of Judaism across the centuries.

4. My journey to Palestinian solidarity has been long and difficult. I chart its beginnings from when I was a student at Manchester University in the late 1980s struggling to understand the outbreak of the first Palestinian Intifada in the Occupied Territories. My final break with Zionism came when I met Christian clergy in Nazareth in 2011 and realised that the failings of Zionism reached far beyond the post 1967 Occupation. Since then I have discovered the principled tradition of Jewish opposition to Zionism dating back to the 19th century and continuing to this day.

The Board of Deputies

5. The Board of Deputies styles itself as the principle 'advocate' for the Jewish community in the UK and exists, in part, to promote a sympathetic understanding of Israel to non-Jewish organisations and to the UK government. It's important to understand how the Board's elected deputies are chosen. Deputies to the Board are drawn from UK synagogues and other formal Jewish institutions who have affiliated to the Board. However, these local elections are often uncontested and with low voter turnout. Additionally, according to a study by Jewish Policy Research in 2017, only 56% of Jewish households in England hold synagogue membership. Meanwhile, Charedi Jews, the fastest growing section of the UK Jewish population, do not recognise the Board's authority, nor do significant numbers of secular British Jews. When the current Board President took office she promised to meet with all sections of the community but there has been no reported meeting with any groups or individuals representing a non-Zionist Jewish position such as Jewish Voice for Labour, Jewdas, or Na'amod. Over the summer of 2020, there was growing dissatisfaction with the Board, expressed by mainstream Jews, particularly from a younger generation, who were frustrated by the Board's position of silence over Israeli plans to annex parts of the West Bank. A letter signed by hundreds of Jewish students (brought up within synagogue communities) told the Board it risked becoming irrelevant to a younger generation of Jews. I would argue that this has already begun to happen.
6. The Board of Deputies is right to say that the majority of Jews in Britain feel strongly attached to the State of Israel and have a profound concern for its safety and security. I would include myself in this thinking. However, a growing number of Jews, especially

the younger generation, are becoming increasingly uneasy and disillusioned about how the Zionist project has played out, not only for the Palestinians but for Jews, and indeed Judaism itself. The Board of Deputies in the United Kingdom, just like its counterparts in America, is loath to acknowledge this fracturing of the Jewish consensus on Israel and Zionism. The Board it yet to find a morally consistent outlook that would allow it to uphold traditional Jewish values in the face of the ever more extreme nature of Israeli politics.

7. The Board has adopted a position of uncritical support for Israel (or else silence on its most egregious behaviour) to the point where its interfaith and public affairs work can only be understood as part of a wider pro-Israel lobby in the United Kingdom which includes many other United Kingdom Jewish organisations. I don't see this as in anyway conspiratorial or nefarious. It's how politics works on many issues. However, it means that the Board's allegations against the Revd Dr Sizer should be seen as taking place within a highly political context and dealing with contested ideologies rather than the protected rights of a minority group.
8. Since my break with Zionism I have experienced first-hand the lengths the Board of Deputies will go to in order to prevent voices of opposition to Zionism being heard, especially to Anglican, Methodist and Quaker audiences. It is impossible to understand the motivation of the Board in regard to my own work (and that of the Revd Dr Sizer) without recognising the Board's strong conviction that Zionism is, and must remain, integral to Jewish identity and indeed central to the expression of Judaism today. It does not want dissenting Jewish voices to be given a platform, regardless of the merits of their arguments, and actively works to prevent such voices being invited or heard. The Board sees any criticisms of Zionism, or even particular actions by governments of the State of Israel, as an attack on Jews and Judaism and therefore works to either challenge or stifle such expressions, often using accusations of antisemitism to make its case. This leads to a suppression of open debate in UK society, including the various Christian denominations, and the vilification of principled voices, both Jewish and non-Jewish. The Board has chosen to make no distinction between antisemitism and anti-Zionism.

Christian Zionism

9. Revd Dr Sizer has become an important and authoritative voice in helping Christians to understand the roots of Christian Zionism. Christian Zionism is quite different to the Jewish idea of Zionism but is hugely influential in generating uncritical support for Israel and considerable hostility towards the Palestinian people. Revd Dr Sizer has been a firm advocate for equality for all who call the Holy Land home. In addition, he has consistently spoken out against antisemitism and against Holocaust denial. However, as a high-profile figure, the Board of Deputies view his writing as a threat to its own ability to influence Christian denominations in their thinking about Israel and Zionism.

Amos Trust

10. Amos Trust (of which I am a Trustee) is a small, creative human rights organisation committed to challenging injustice, building hope and creating positive change. It partners with vibrant grass-roots projects around the world that have unique local experience, expertise and connections. Collaboration is at the heart of everything it does.
11. Amos Trust was founded by singer, song writer, Canon Garth Hewitt. The Revd Dr Sizer was a trustee of the Amos Trust for many years and has been involved and has embraced its work.
12. The main areas of work of the Amos Trust focus on street justice, climate justice and Palestine justice. The Trust promotes the rights of street children, seeks to build sustainable rural communities (in Nicaragua) and to create a just peace for Palestine.
13. As I have said, one of its foci is Palestine injustice. Working with local and international peace activists, and partnering with grass-roots projects, it calls for a just peace, reconciliation and full equal rights for all Palestinians and Israelis.
14. Its Palestinian partners run community programmes to promote creative, non-violent resistance to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and work to relieve the stress and despair that the occupation causes within these communities. Amos Trust seeks to share their stories, stand with them in their suffering and support the work they do, raising awareness of the horrors of home demolitions, the building of the

Separation Wall, restrictions on freedom of movement and the daily impact of life under occupation.

Statement of truth

15. I believe the facts and matters in this statement to be true.

ROBERT COHEN

Date: