

## **Sir Leon Levison at High Leigh 1931**

### **Kai Kjær-Hansen, International Coordinator of LCJE**

80 years ago Sir Leon Levinson was standing in this building welcoming the participants to the Third International Hebrew Christian Conference. The conference was attended by some 200 delegates. Sir Leon had been elected as the International Alliance's first president at Islington, London, in September 1925. The second international IHCA conference was held in Hamburg in 1928, the third here at High Leigh in 1931. It is interesting that the name "High Leigh" is part of two of the 26 chapter headings in Fred Levison's biography about his father, namely "Hamburg to High Leigh" and "The Year of High Leigh".

Leon was born in 1881, but hardly in Safed, as he sometimes says, as the son of Rabbi Nahum, who was President of Safed's Cabbalistic School and who had many positions of trust and travelled a great deal, sometimes accompanied by his family. Let us leave that now. The father died when Leon was five. As a teenager in Safed he would sometimes read, in the synagogue, one of the six appointed portions from the Tanach on successive Sabbaths. One day after the service a woman approached his mother: "Your son reads well, but do you think he understands what he is reading?" Of course the mother defended her son: "he is an excellent Hebrew scholar". But she nevertheless got him a tutor who would study the Bible with Leon.

All went well till they passed the Torah, Leon Levison relates later on, "but on beginning the Psalms and Prophets the tutor became more particular and wanted me to pass over certain portions. I asked him why ... but he said 'Never mind, if we skip them we shall be done the sooner.'" This aroused Leon's curiosity and he started on his own to read the passages which seemed to be dangerous to the Jewish faith. Secretly he took contact to some Christian missionaries in Safed. He receives a Hebrew New Testament; the forbidden book is also studied secretly and his faith is awakened – and confessed to his mother. "If only," Leon said later, "I could have broken my own heart instead of hers." And: "My home life after this confession was very miserable, except for the joy and peace within. I suffered so much persecution that I was advised by the missionaries to leave home."

Out of grief and shame that Leon with his newfound faith had profaned and abandoned all that the family held dear, they chose to keep it inside the family. The youngest son Nahum, who was away when this happened, is even told that Leon has died. It took Nahum, who also came to faith and who also participated in High Leigh in 1931, several years to discover that Leon was alive and well – in Edinburgh, where he had arrived in January 1901.

Let us now move on to High Leigh 1931. I forgo dealing with the themes that were in focus at the conference. Instead I have chosen to let Sir Leon speak here at *our* opening session. His style may in places seem rather bombastic and pompous to us; in some people's opinion he was "something of a mystic", and the vocabulary is clearly that of a Jesus-believer 80 year ago; he described himself as "a Jew by race and a Christian by grace". The main theme of his speech was being "Christ-like". This is a matter that we should indeed listen to and be inspired by today.

We shall now listen to the second half of Sir Leon's Opening Address at the Third International Hebrew Christian Conference here at High Leigh in 1931.

### **Excerpt from Sir Leon's Opening Address at High Leigh 1931**

It was the Son of God Who became the Son of Man that the sons of men might become the sons of God. His is the finest ideal of service for the human race. His is indeed the Pattern-life; and in and through Him the life of the Eternal Father is perfectly reproduced on earth, in all its healing pity, and sinless purity, ceaseless benevolence and divine tenderness. Christ is the great synthesis of all human Being; and in Him the moral and spiritual excellencies of the Universe meet and mingle. He is the great religious Ideal for all time. Power was the ideal of Rome. Beauty of Greece, but the Christian ideal is this – “To me to live is Christ.”

Man’s ideals are ever in advance of his reals, but in Christ, we have the ideal and the real ideal. In Him, we have the “Happy Bridal of the Earth and Sky,” never more to be divorced.

The assimilating power of a sublime life is stupendous. “Where love is the artist, and the supreme Object of Love the Pattern, and Humanity the material, the moulding process must come.” Christ is love incarnate, wisdom incarnate, humanity incarnate, purity incarnate, beauty incarnate, and by looking earnestly unto Him, we unconsciously become like Him. It is the law of our nature that we are gradually transformed to the image of Him we admire most and love best. “We needs must love the highest when we see it.” Of all visions, the Vision of Christ is the finest, let us never cease to study His character until it shapes our own; let us look right into the face of the Divine Son and catch His beauty. Shall He not be ours in an ever increasing sense? He the Rabbi, and we the scholars. He the Bridegroom, and we the bride. He the sun, and we the planets. He the great Original and we the faint copies.

I can hear someone say, “What is the use of so high an ideal, we shall never be able to reach it?” Very likely not, but an ideal lower than itself – you would be the first to despise. We must always have the perfect as our goal. For an ideal man – you must have a perfect man. We shall never be better than we aim to be. By striving to reach the unattainable, we achieve much more than if we made no effort at all. There might be schemes spoken of at this Conference that will startle you, but always remember we can never aim too high. Although we shall never reach the moral excellence of the sinless Christ of ours, still, He lifts us up as no one else can, blessed be his name. He shows us the goal and gives us power to reach it if we have absolute confidence in Him. He is more than a living Helper, putting into our hearts a moral excelsior that helps us onwards and upwards, showing us the goal and giving us the power to reach it. “He giveth power to the faint.” Here we have not only a high morality, but a mighty moral dynamic, to make the morality operative.

The *ne plus ultra* [i.e. the highest aim] of the Christian life must be always to be Christ-like. We may be as strong as Hercules, as swift as Mercury, and as beautiful as Apollo, but unless we are Christ-like we are incomplete. God help us to live *with* Christ and work *for* Christ, and give our best *to* Christ so that on death’s day, we shall be able to see Heaven and Earth melt into one another just as the night melts into the morning.

The quality of our work and our faith, as well as of our life and death, will depend on the quality of our service, in order to achieve our goal which is the salvation of our Jewish people in Christ Jesus. With such an ideal as the Lord Christ before us I am confident that our cause will triumph. With such a magnificent ideal as the Christ of God, His Life, His Work, His Death, His Resurrection to gaze upon and copy – our Alliance will not perish.

Let us not have an ideal only, the vision of a saved Israel, but let us see how we may best live according to our vision. St. Paul’s vision would have meant nothing to Him, had he not asked,

“Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?” We cannot be children of Christ without a commission and when we come to Him the first thing He says to us is “Go,” I want you to strive for altitudes; we have lived too much in latitudes, wandering to and fro; let us climb to the mountain top and see Jesus Christ here on earth as in heaven.

### **Sir Leon - indicative and imperative**

If Sir Leon himself did not in everything live up the ideal he held forth at High Leigh, it does not render his message less relevant. Nor does it make him a hypocrite.

The Apostle Paul calls and exhorts in his letters the believers to a holy life in Christ, Sir Leon also urges people to a “Christ-like” life. There was a strong call from *Lausanne III* to Christian leaders to show integrity and be authentic leaders; 80 years ago Sir Leon did the same at High Leigh, fully aware that “we shall never reach the moral excellence of the sinless Christ”. Like Paul he knows the tension between the *indicative* and the *imperative* of the faith: the indicative states what we by grace have been given *in Christ*; the imperative exhorts us to live *like Christ* with Jesus as our example.

Fred Levison says about his biography of his father: “Emotionally involved, one may make it either a sentimental act of pious adulation or, if one’s childhood has been unhappy, a perverse one of denigration.” He does neither, he honours his father, and in my opinion he does not degrade his father when he concludes his description of Sir Leon with these words:

He was not patently holy nor disciplined in prayer, but he was whole and, as we have seen, had a holistic vision, and a profound faith. Nor was he without the ordinary faults and foibles; he could be ingratiating, flattering people more than they deserved; sometimes he stretched the truth; he was often blind to others people’s failings; and, less reprehensibly, often untidy in his habit, scattering cigarette-ash and papers around him, his study a shambles.”

Who wants to throw the first stone?

### **Lost and Found**

My best photo from *Lausanne III* is a group picture of twelve persons related to Jewish evangelism – eight Jews and four non-Jews – photographed at LCJE’s meeting-point in the large congress centre in Cape Town. As meeting-point we had chosen the place outside the *Lost and Found Office*.

*Lost and Found* seemed fitting for us in LCJE. We confess that we were lost but found. We also confess that if today we are not found, we are lost. When we share the gospel with other people – Jews as well as non-Jews – we say: Let us now go to Israel’s God and Jesus’ father, you with your sins and I with mine, and together experience the forgiveness of sins and a new life.

In Jewish evangelism as well as in all other Christian mission, the messenger, the witness, needs God’s grace in Christ as much as the one who is the object of the testimony. May that be signalled clearly by the witness – and may it be heard by the person who hears the testimony.

### **Select bibliography**

Leon Levison, “Opening Address,” *The Hebrew Christian*, vol. IV, no. 3 (October 1931): 140-44. – The issue covers IHCA’s conference in 1931.

Frederick Levison, *Christian and Jew. The life of Leon Levison 1881-1936* (Edinburgh: The Pentland Press Ltd.), 1989.

*Kai Kjær-Hansen*  
*lcje-kai@post4.tele.dk*