

The JC interview: Trevor Asserson

Watch maker

Hearing relentless complaints about media bias against Israel moved one single-minded lawyer to action, as he explains to Jenni Frazer

If there's one thing on which British Jews agree, it is that something "must be done" about Israel's image in this country. Chief among the targets for complaint is the BBC, which is regularly accused of anti-Israel bias. Rarely, however, does anyone take any action.

But just occasionally, individuals — as opposed to communal organisations — do pop up with a can-do mentality and try and challenge the media monoliths. Chief among them is London lawyer Trevor Asserson, who set up his own website, BBC Watch, to monitor the corporation's output on Israel. As befits a lawyer's site, BBC Watch is densely argued and carefully worded, deliberately devoid of kneejerk responses.

The tall and slightly diffident Asserson is now — for a second time — to bring his Israeli activism to a logical conclusion by making aliyah and setting up what he claims is a unique facility in Israel, offering English law litigation facilities.

Asserson's background gives no clue that he would become such an upfront spokesman for Israel. "I am," he says, "from a family as assimilated as one can get. I had the perfect English public school upbringing: a smart prep school followed by boarding school — Stowe."

He believes his parents removed him from Hampstead Garden Suburb to Stowe in the belief that this would allow him to take his place anywhere in English society. Somewhat to his parents' consternation, however, Asserson embraced Orthodox Judaism. "My parents are not disappointed with me today but they were very disappointed when I first became *frum*," he says. "They looked on it as a sort of betrayal, a kind of closing of the doors which they had so carefully opened."

So how did it happen? In 1979, just before his final year at Oxford, Asserson was due to go on holiday with his non-Jewish girlfriend. "But her parents," he says with a grin, "were quite *frum* and didn't think it appropriate for their unmarried daughter to go on holiday with a boy." So instead Asserson rang a friend whom he knew was going to Israel, and made his first visit. Up to then, he says, he had always thought of Israel as "rather kitsch: all the Jewish kids went but I certainly wasn't going to go..."

In Israel, he was invited by some people he bumped into on a bus to join them for Shabbat. He ended up in the wrong house with the wrong people but they turned out to be relations that he didn't know existed, in Kfar Chabad, the Lubavitch village in Israel. "I had no conception that I had any family that was *frum*," he says, "and to find I had family on Kfar Chabad was totally bizarre. I didn't know what Kfar Chabad was."

He went back the following Shabbat and they suggested that, when he returned to the UK, he meet Rabbi Shlomo Levin, the charismatic South African rabbi who transformed the South Hampstead community.

"He'd only just arrived and he wasn't well-known," Asserson says. "But he happened to live in the same street as my parents so I thought I'd go — and it was a very good *shidduch*. We've stayed good friends ever since: I was taken in by the local Chabad community and by the local *frum* community. I had more invitations than I could cope with. It was a very welcoming embrace."

Asserson left Oxford, where he read modern history, and received job offers from, he says, nine out of 10 of the largest law firms in London. But the one which he accepted, the most prestigious, withdrew its offer once he said he wanted to leave early for Shabbat. (At this

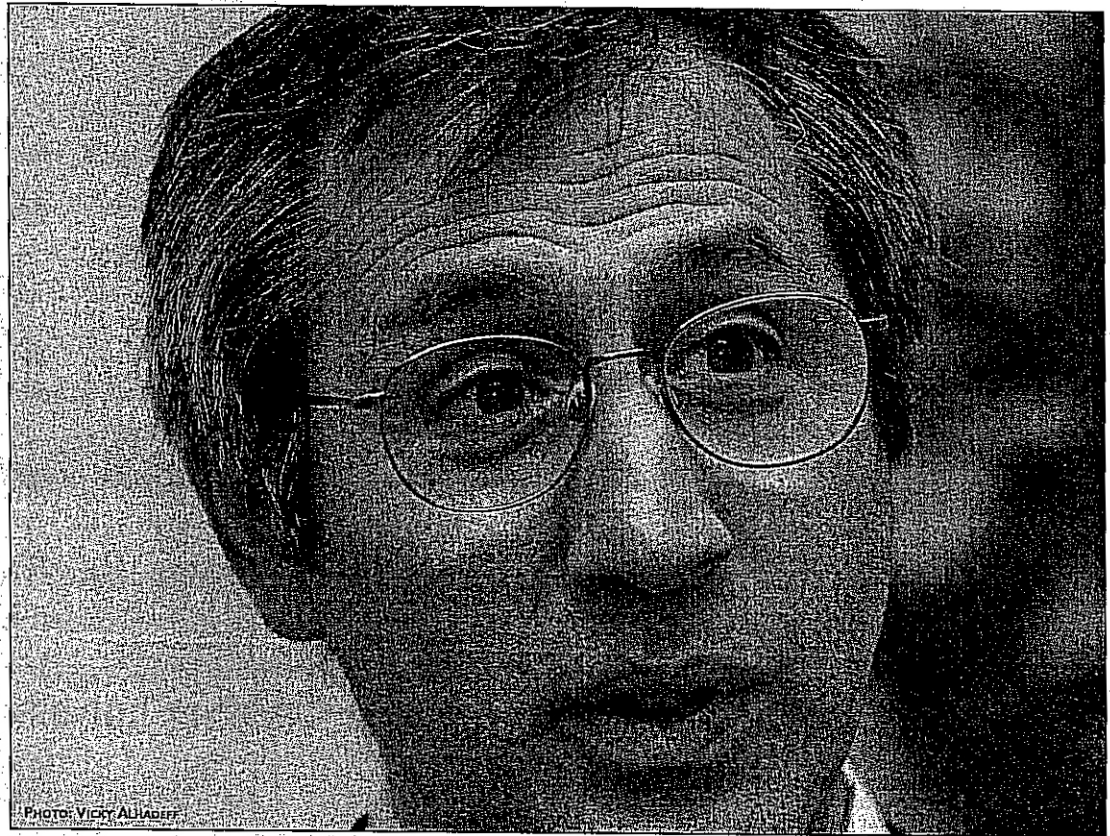


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point, Asserson says cheerfully, his parents were in despair.)

He did finally get a job in "a nice firm," and then went to Herbert Smith, the top firm in the country for litigation. "They nearly threw me out on the first day because of Shabbat but decided to keep me." After three years, Asserson decided he wanted to work in legal aid while he was still unmarried and had relatively few burdens, so he joined another firm and set up what became the largest legal-aid housing department in England.

His career may have been blossoming but socially, Asserson suggests, things were difficult. Becoming *frum* had lost him most of his non-Jewish and Jewish friends: "they thought I was barmy. They couldn't share in most of the activities I was involved in and there wasn't much time left for anything else. Yes, it was lonely. I didn't have many friends of my own age; there were lots of families, but it's not the same."

Being a single-minded sort, Asserson decided that if he weren't married by a certain age, he would go to Israel and find a wife. Which is what he did, intending to stay. He was, he smiles wryly, "98 per cent successful." In 1991 Asserson met and married Mofli, who had emigrated to Israel from Britain 20 years earlier. She was a senior nurse at Jerusalem's Shaare Zedek hospital. But, though he qualified as an Israeli lawyer in 1992, he had very poor Hebrew, the country was going through a recession, and he was a litigator while all the international lawyers were doing company commercial law. "I decided I was probably too old to have an experimental five

years to see if I could overcome these problems," he says. "If I had any chance of recovering a normal career and earning money, I needed to go back to England."

Mali was utterly miserable at this decision. "She went from being a highly respected senior person in a large hospital in a country she loved, to being a mother of a young baby, unemployed, with an unemployed husband, in a country she didn't want to live in."

In London, Asserson became international head of litigation at the law firm Bird & Bird, responsible for its seven offices around Europe and the Far East. Later, he joined the city firm, Morgan Lewis. By now, with two children, he had a long-term plan to go back to Israel.

In the meantime, Asserson would go to dinner parties where people would wring their hands at what they saw as the bias of the BBC, but no one seemed to do anything about it. Having previously acted for Liberal Democrats David Owen and David Steel in a successful complaint to the BBC about not being on television enough, Asserson says he "knew how to do it." And, in 2000, he wrote a paper which he presented to the pro-Israel lobby, Bicom, the Board of Deputies and the Israeli embassy, outlining what he believed to be the problem at the BBC and suggesting what could be done. "I was told that this memo went round the community like wildfire. And then," he shrugs, "it was just dropped."

He decided to do something himself, hiring a student at his own expense, designing the evidence that needed to be analysed, and then paying someone to watch television. They then

sat and worked out whether there was in fact bias or whether "it was just oversensitive Jews, getting in a frenzy." The result was the first BBC Watch report, which Asserson posted on the web. In days, he was getting international feedback.

Still, not only did he fail to persuade the Board and Bicom to endorse the BBC Watch report but, he says, a number of senior people in the community tried to get him to suppress the report altogether.

But things have moved on and for his latest report, Asserson has turned to the picture section of the hugely influential BBC website, specifically the "World in Pictures" section, where five to 12 pictures are posted each day.

Asserson looked at 1,000 pictures over the period of January to June 2005. Almost 50 are related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Asserson has endeavoured to classify them as pro-Israel, pro-Palestinian or neutral. The captions to the pictures, he says, "are almost universally critical of Israel. We are left with an overwhelming image of oppressive, military Israelis and gentle, suffering Palestinians. I don't believe this is balanced, fair or impartial."

He is likely to present this latest report to the BBC governors from his new home in Israel, where he has relocated this autumn with a radical approach to practising English law: "Because I do international law, I'm used to having long-distance relations with clients. I have very few meetings which are not on the phone: so I realised that if I had my legal team around me — and given email and the internet — it's viable to run complex litigation remotely."

Asserson has also been invited to set up a European media studies group for the Jerusalem Council for Public Affairs, "which will give me a better infrastructure, a label... provided I find some funding. BBC Watch will retain a separate identity but will gain logistical support from JCPA. But I think there may be other topics which will be as, or more, pressing than the BBC." CNN, watch out.

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