

# Judaism in the National RE Syllabus: An Urgent Call for Partnership

**To:** Dr Vanessa Ogden CBE and other interested parties  
**From:** Association of Jewish Religious Education Professionals  
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## Executive Summary

We are Jewish RE professionals with over a century of combined experience in UK classrooms. We welcome the National RE Syllabus but are deeply concerned that current approaches risk breaching the Equality Act and undermining social cohesion.

**The Core Issue:** Framing Judaism as a “religious worldview” imposes a Protestant Christian framework onto an ethnoreligion that binds people through shared history, culture, and practice, not primarily through beliefs. This discriminatory approach has already triggered an Equality complaint in Berkshire.

### What We Need:

1. **Partnership, not consultation** – Jewish RE professionals must co-author content about Judaism, not merely be consulted
2. **Judaism taught at multiple key stages** – Essential for social cohesion and preventing antisemitism, even in areas with few Jews
3. **Lived tradition approach** – Teach Judaism as Jews understand it: identity and practice, not just theology
4. **Inclusive key questions** – Avoid Christo-centric framing that excludes ethnoreligions (Equality Act compliance)
5. **Substantive knowledge priority** – Focus on religious literacy over personal worldviews to achieve the knowledge-rich curriculum outlined in your Conceptual Paper

**Why This Matters:** For Jews, misrepresentation in RE is existential. It affects our safety and our children’s ability to live freely in the UK. We are confident you understand the importance of authentic religious voices in this work.

**The Ask:** We request a meeting to discuss how we can partner effectively on the Judaism content for the National Syllabus.

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# Problem: Current Approaches Breach the Equality Act

## Judaism Is Not a “Worldview”

Many recent syllabi [frame religions as “religious worldviews”](#), an approach from the [CORE report](#) that the Board of Deputies [strongly opposed](#). **This discriminates against Judaism and other ethnoreligions.**

Unlike Protestant Christianity, Judaism binds people together primarily through:

- Shared history and peoplehood (Children of Israel)
- Attachment to Torah (the covenantal relationship between God and Israel)
- Culture and practice of the Jewish People (Shabbat, festivals, dietary laws)
- Connection to place (Land of Israel, prayers directed toward Jerusalem)

Using the headings “Philosophy”, “Theology” and “History and Social Sciences” minimises the significance of aspects of religion outside of (propositional) belief. This framework makes no sense for Judaism, for which belief is primarily relational and a core principle is precisely faith in action (*na'aseh venishmah*). The previous framework of **Believing, Behaving, and Belonging** was far more inclusive.

## Real-World Consequences

In Berkshire, Jews filed an Equality complaint against a Worldviews [syllabus](#), written by highly esteemed RE experts, that erased our identity as the Children of Israel. Moreover, Jews and Hindus were forced repeatedly to raise the alarm about [Critical RE exercises](#) in which primary school pupils developed their **personal worldviews** of by evaluating which religious beliefs were more “likely” or reasonable.

These events demonstrate that good intentions are not enough without authentic community voices as full partners.

For Jews, “disputations” (debates over whose beliefs are more reasonable) evoke medieval oppression. Such discussions may veer into proselytising / religious persuasion, which breaks the social contract that allows schools to function in a diverse society under the Equality Act and Education Act.

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## Solution: What Judaism Needs in the National Syllabus

### 1. Jewish RE Professionals as Co-Authors

We are not just faith representatives. **We are RE professionals.** Members of religions are subject experts and should co-author syllabus content about their traditions, not merely be consulted.

**The recognition test:** Jewish children should recognise their lived religion in what is taught. Currently, they often cannot and feel like “museum exhibits.” Content should be determined

by **what Jews believe others need to know to understand us**, which may differ from non-Jewish assumptions.

## 2. Judaism Across Multiple Key Stages

Judaism must appear at multiple key stages as part of a spiral of learning, even in areas with few Jews. This is essential because:

- **Social cohesion:** Understanding Judaism prevents antisemitism
- **Future mobility:** Children need preparation for life beyond their birthplace
- **Accurate understanding:** Jewish concepts appear in Christianity and Islam teaching; without learning Judaism as Judaism, students gain distorted views (e.g., the creation story has vastly different meanings in Torah versus Christian original sin theology)

**Current problem:** Many children learn about Judaism in KS1, then do not encounter it again until the Holocaust in KS3, creating a profoundly distorted view.

## 3. Substantive Knowledge Over Personal Worldviews

The [Conceptual Paper](#) accompanying your [Interim Report](#) calls for knowledge-rich curriculum with substantive, disciplinary, and applied knowledge, not “personal worldviews.”

Focusing on personal worldviews / the study of Big Questions risks:

- Descending into arguments over which beliefs are more [reasonable](#) (as in [Berkshire](#))
- Losing the religious literacy essential for social cohesion
- Pressuring minority faith children in classroom debates ([unlawful indoctrination](#))
- Breaching schools’ [legal duty of impartiality](#)

**Religious literacy, substantive knowledge, fosters social cohesion.** Personal worldview debates undermine it.

## 4. Inclusive Key Questions

Many current syllabi use key questions that impose a Christian / Post Christian lens on other religions. Knowledgeable teachers can work around poorly conceived questions, but teachers are too frequently not subject experts.

**Problematic:** “What makes some places sacred to believers?”

**Better:** “What makes a place holy?”

**Why:** Most Jews don’t describe themselves as “believers”

**Problematic:** “How important is it for Jewish people to do what God asks them to do?”

**Better:** “How does practicing mitzvot bring holiness into Jewish lives?”

**Why:** Honours that [faith in action](#) is foundational in Judaism

**Problematic:** “Is there a God and how do people think they know?”

**Better:** “How is the relationship between humans and the transcendent different across religions and worldviews?”

**Why:** Relational concepts rather than propositional beliefs

GCSE courses focus on life after death, God's nature, and the Messiah while neglecting the God-Israel relationship. Themed questions in Worldviews syllabi ignore how traditions organize time, dietary laws, clothing, pilgrimage festivals, prayer direction, matters central to many religions but perhaps not to Protestant Christianity.

**Making questions more inclusive also helps non-religious children** by focusing on our shared human condition, aiding social cohesion.

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## Additional Critical Points

### 5. Diversity Without Stereotyping

Balance is essential: Don't stereotype Jews as all orthodox, but don't exaggerate differences either. Explain diversity within what Jews have in common.

Don't treat movements in Judaism like competing Christian sects. This misses diversity like Ashkenazi/Sephardi distinctions that have nothing to do with theology.

### 6. Holocaust Education vs. Judaism Teaching

We strongly support Holocaust education in History. However, **Holocaust education must never replace teaching Judaism as a living tradition in RE.** The two serve different educational purposes and both are necessary.

The Holocaust was how we were murdered because of our ethnicity. Judaism is how we live in our civilisation.

### 7. Political Neutrality

Schools have a legal duty of impartiality. RE materials increasingly adopt politicised lessons assuming one viewpoint is correct, or adopt specific religious practices (writing "Mohammed PBUH," assuming humanism is exclusively secular). These breach [impartiality duties](#).

### 8. Non-Religious Worldviews: Welcome but Distinct

We welcome teaching non-religious worldviews alongside religions. However:

- RE cannot be reduced to ethics, philosophy, or Big Questions
- Religions and worldviews are distinct, overlapping phenomena

### 9. Acknowledge links between traditions

In keeping with the critique of the World Religions paradigm, the syllabus should not treat religions or worldviews as discrete, self-contained traditions.

- Explore links/parallels between both practices and beliefs across different religions. Do not draw these connections only when seeking answers to Big Questions.
- Children should know when newer religions or worldviews have incorporated elements from foundational religions (avoiding cultural plagiarism / appropriation)

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## The Opportunity

This National Syllabus should model how to:

- Respect authentic voices from religious communities
- Provide substantive knowledge fostering social cohesion
- Treat all religions equitably without imposing a universal framework onto others
- Comply fully with the Equality Act
- Achieve the knowledge-rich curriculum your Conceptual Paper envisions

**We are ready to partner with you to make this happen.**

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## Who We Are

We represent the UK's most experienced RE Judaism professionals and Jewish classroom teachers of RE:

[Dr Shira Batya Lewin Solomons](#), [Eve Sacker](#), [Rabbi Zvi Solomons](#), [Sarah Carson](#), [Tamar Bacall](#), [Natasha Wertheim](#), [Ruth Jampel](#), [Lucy Sidney](#), and [Ed Horwich](#)

We span the full spectrum of Jewish backgrounds and bring over a century of combined experience in the profession.

Learn more: [ajrep.uk](http://ajrep.uk)

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## APPENDIX: Additional Details of our Concerns

### 1. The “Religions as Worldviews” Framework

The [CORE report](#) advocates framing religions as “religious worldviews.” The Board of Deputies [objected vociferously](#) to this approach, objections that stand. Agreement with the National Statement of Entitlement cannot be misconstrued as agreement with the CORE report, nor with the idea that religions could or should be framed as themselves being a subset of worldviews.

Judaism is a civilizational religion (ethnoreligion) based on covenant and ethnicity / belonging. RE must recognise concepts central to Jewish identity: the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, the Children of Israel (Jews as a people), connection with the Land of Israel, and *kivun* (prayer direction toward the Temple Mount). Current Worldviews syllabi consistently downplay these elements. The [syllabus](#) initially approved in Berkshire even removed all mention of the word “Israel”.

Judaism and other ethnoreligions bind people together primarily through shared history, culture, and practice and not primarily through shared beliefs or worldviews, which is a very narrow (protestant Christian / post Christian) philosophical approach. One of the core ideas in Judaism is precisely *na'aseh venishmah* – the primacy of action over propositional belief. One becomes Jewish not by just adopting a worldview but by joining a covenantal family.

The focus on personal worldviews central to Worldviews syllabi is not supported by the [Conceptual Paper](#) that accompanies the [Interim Report](#), as this paper emphasises applied or practical knowledge, not specifically personal knowledge.

## **2. Faith Members as Subject Experts: The Expertise Principle**

The pursuit of “subject rigour” should not sideline authentic religious voices who do not see their religion through the lens of “rigorous” teaching frameworks, especially when those voices belong to RE professionals who understand both the subject and pedagogy.

In every aspect of the syllabus, children of the faith examined should recognise their religion. The content should reflect what adherents themselves understand to be important, which may differ from outsider assumptions shaped by Christian cultural backgrounds.

## **3. The Berkshire Case: Lessons Learned**

The Berkshire Syllabus controversy demonstrated that even respected RE experts can produce [content](#) leading to Equality complaints or safeguarding failures when authentic community voices aren't full partners in development. The [Critical RE exercises](#), crafted by RE experts in an attempt to help children develop their personal worldviews, would also have placed primary-age children in positions of evaluating religious truth claims - something inappropriate for schools' legal duty of impartiality and particularly harmful to minority faith children.

## **4. Why Minority Faiths Cannot Be Neglected**

Even in areas with few or no Jewish residents, Judaism must be taught because:

- Children's futures are not limited to their birthplaces; they need understanding for life in diverse Britain
- Antisemitism prevention requires understanding authentic Judaism, not stereotypes or Christian-filtered versions
- Jewish concepts foundational to Christianity and Islam are misunderstood when taught only through those lenses
- Social cohesion depends on mutual understanding, which requires substantive knowledge of all major UK faith communities

The pattern of teaching Judaism in KS1 then only encountering Jews again through the Holocaust in KS3 creates deeply problematic associations and prevents understanding Judaism as a living tradition.

Similar arguments apply to other minority faiths, which must also be given due space as part of a spiral of learning. A rebalancing of RE is needed that emphasises breadth over depth.

## 5. Balancing Diversity and Coherence

Teaching diversity is important (not all Jews are orthodox), but current approaches often:

- Exaggerate differences to the point where students can't grasp what Judaism is
- Present movements in Judaism like Christian denominational splits based on theological disputes
- Stereotype subgroups of Jews while attempting to teach diversity
- Miss other forms of diversity (Ashkenazi/Sephardi, cultural/ethnic variations) that have little to do with belief differences

**The solution:** explain diversity within the context of what unites Jews, providing coherent understanding in limited classroom time.

## 6. Political Neutrality and Impartiality

RE materials increasingly incorporate politicized content assuming particular viewpoints are correct. Examples include:

- Adopting practices from other religions/worldviews (writing "PBUH" after Mohammed, assuming humanism must be secular)
- Presenting disputed political positions as settled truth
- Encouraging classroom activities where children's beliefs are evaluated or ranked

Schools' [legal duty of impartiality](#) must be maintained.

Children should not feel compelled to justify their religious belief or lack of belief. This applies all the more so to those from minority faiths for whom such exercises would have a discriminatory impact that would constitute [unlawful indoctrination](#) under the ECHR.

**The distinction to preserve:** Religious beliefs and practices that pertain only to the internal life of a tradition require no justification. However, beliefs impacting those outside one's faith group are appropriately debatable in applied/practical RE contexts. Examples: political positions or claims about others' traditions.

## 7. Non-Religious Worldviews: The Right Balance

We support teaching non-religious worldviews, particularly:

- How religions and worldviews cross-fertilize and influence each other
- Including non-religious perspectives when exploring Big Questions

However:

- RE cannot be reduced to ethics, philosophy, or Big Question studies
- Religions are not mere worldviews; they are distinct, overlapping phenomena
- When newer religions or worldviews incorporate elements from foundational religions, this should be acknowledged to avoid cultural appropriation and help students understand religious influence and evolution.