



An Evening with Lady Simler 8 July 2026

Lady Simler, Justice of the Supreme Court, spoke to Samantha Leek KC about thwarted acting ambitions, life at the Bar, the Bench, diversity and Jewish identity, at an event hosted by the UK branch of the International Association of Jewish Lawyers.

There was not a seat to spare at Winston Taylor LLP's newly refurbished offices in New Street Square on 8 July for an evening with Lady Simler, Justice of the Supreme Court and a Vice President of the UK branch of the International Association of Jewish Lawyers ("UKIJL"). Such was the demand that there was a waiting list.

As the chair, Sir Clive Freedman, observed in his welcome, the Association's membership has grown by around half in recent months without any membership drive, as Jewish lawyers have sought the comfort, since 7 October, of coming together and being part of an international association with branches in some fifty countries.

The evening took the form of an interview by Samantha Leek KC, tracing Lady Simler's path from South Africa, where she was born, to London at the age of nine, to the Henrietta Barnett School, to law at Cambridge and to call to the Bar by Inner Temple in 1987.

Lady Simler explained that her first ambition had been to act. While she thought she might become the next Judi Dench, her parents had other ideas. At Cambridge she co-founded a women's theatre group, Trouble and Strife, producing plays written by and for women, but she concluded that she could not live with the level of rejection an acting career would involve, and turned her attention to the law.

Recounting her time at Cambridge, she described how her director of studies went round the supervision group asking the six men whether they were destined for the Bar or for the solicitors' profession, but told the three women, one of whom was a young and inexperienced Simler that the Bar was no place for a woman and becoming a solicitor was presumed. Simler's reaction: "Well, that's it, I'll become a barrister." When his name came up again in questions from the floor, she noted that he had been an inspirational teacher of whom she was very fond, and added, with good humour, that she was grateful to him for telling her that the Bar was no place for a woman, because she had a wonderful career as a result.

Pupillage began at, what is now called, Monckton Chambers. With a postgraduate diploma in EU law from Amsterdam and a thesis on Bilka-Kaufhaus, she had expected European discrimination law; this was not what she found. Faced with tens of boxes of discovery and little prospect of being on her feet, she took the unusual decision to ask to move after only six months into her pupillage. She was sent to Devereux Chambers, where the head of pupillage, Diana Cotton QC (known in chambers as the headmistress), made clear that no tenancy was on offer. Simler asked simply for a pupillage, and secured one. A detail she did not know at the time, but which came out during the evening, was that Devereux was established in the 1950s by a group of young Jewish barristers who could not get into other sets because of their background.

Her first case on her feet was for the Free Representation Unit. She lost, and was devastated; the client was grateful; and opposing counsel (a senior member of Devereux) evidently said something kind about her, because tenancy was forthcoming. An employment practice grew, with Post Office and BT work in the tribunals, then the EAT and the Court of Appeal, alongside Treasury panel work, which in those days positively encouraged juniors to try new areas of law. Appointment as a Revenue Junior took her into tax litigation, the Chancery Division and occasionally the Supreme Court. She spoke of her enjoyment of cross-examination when armed with good material. The opponent she most respected was Jonathan Peacock KC, who in tax cases “could make the worst point sound compelling”, as he demonstrated in the Court of Appeal by winning on a point he had told her, shortly before the hearing, that he wished he did not have to defend. She acknowledged that there were also difficult days, of bad cases and difficult judges, when one thought “wouldn't it be nice to get run over on the way to work... keep me out of court for a week”.

She took silk in 2006 and later became head of Devereux, a role carried alongside a busy practice, sitting as a recorder and four children. Asked how she had managed, she answered candidly: “I really don't know.” She then identified three things: reliable childcare; a community of support at home and in chambers, somewhere to say that I may have “screwed up”, and a place to talk about it; and perspective. Inevitably, something has to give. Her youngest daughter, who had once wished her mother came into school like the others, told her years later that she was proud of her and wanted a similar career herself.

She applied to the High Court bench in 2013, expecting to be unsuccessful and intended to use it as a ‘trial run’. In fact, she was appointed at the first attempt. A sign on her desk in her early days as a judge read “Shut up”, a reminder to resist the advocate's instinct to ask questions. She became the first female President of the Employment Appeal Tribunal, went to the Court of Appeal in June 2019 and in November 2023 was sworn in as a Justice of the Supreme Court, only the fifth woman to hold that office, 101 years after Helena Normanton became the first woman to practise at the English Bar. Two of the twelve current Justices are women; both, as Samantha Leek noted, are Jewish. In the Supreme Court the most junior Justice gives their view first in deliberations, an experience Lady Simler described as terrifying at first, although, with two more recent appointments now going before her, she said she rather misses going first.

Diversity has run through her judicial career: High Court liaison judge for diversity, then from 2019 chair of the Judges' Council Diversity Committee, where she replaced a reactive approach with a five-year strategy. For women, she believes, a tipping point has been reached: women silks and women judges are now unremarkable. She recalled sitting on an all-female Court of Appeal panel to no comment at all. Representation of black and brown practitioners has not increased at the same rate, and improving it, particularly for black practitioners, was her priority as chair. She was frank that those efforts were "pretty badly rewarded", and frank, too, about why: those who have overcome enormous hurdles to become silks or partners may reasonably ask why they should give it all up to start again, with no tap on the shoulder (which is a good thing) and a real possibility of failure. She accepted that while great progress has been made there is still a long way to go. She also described her experience of the judicial reverse mentoring scheme, under which she was twinned with a criminal barrister from Nottingham, black and gay, whose accounts of the obstacles and discrimination still faced by black barristers she said had horrified her. Their first meeting, in a coffee shop opposite the Royal Courts of Justice, lasted two hours, and the relationship has grown into an enduring friendship: the barrister has been her guest at the Lord Mayor's dinner for the judges and, the roles now reversed, is being encouraged by Lady Simler to apply to become a recorder.

On Jewish identity, Lady Simler said that she had never been particularly religious but had always felt culturally Jewish, with large family Saturday lunches a fixture, and that she had rarely spoken of her Jewishness as a judge. Since 7 October she has felt it more acutely, and has found it acknowledged by others: after the Manchester synagogue attack and the tragedy in Sydney, colleagues asked how she was, something that had not happened before. In court, she emphasised, personal beliefs are "of course" set aside.

Asked what makes a good judge today, she identified the established requirements of independence, impartiality, sound legal knowledge, integrity, fairness and temperament, together with social and cultural awareness, an understanding of the lives of those whose problems judges must resolve (including litigants in person, who appear even in the Supreme Court), a facility with new technology, efficiency in under-resourced courts and a willingness to reach out to practitioners and judges from non-traditional backgrounds and to ensure the atmosphere they find is an inclusive one. Her advice on advocacy was simple - Be prepared and know your case inside out, so that you can be taken out of order and still return to your planned structure. She confirmed that oral advocacy does change judicial minds: it has happened to her in the Supreme Court, and on occasion to the whole court, where the oral argument brought out what lengthy skeletons had not.

She recalled two episodes from the criminal courts: the witness in a murder trial who collapsed when warned against self-incrimination (to which her clerk was sure that rather than fainting, the witness had excelled in pure drama.) and the university student she sentenced as a recorder for forging £40,000 of Tesco vouchers. The judges at Chelmsford advised her that prison was unavoidable; having just completed the recorders' prison visit, she knew exactly where she was sending him, gave the shortest sentence she could, and had to live for the next week with what he was going through. That account, Samantha Leek observed,

captured the combination of emotional intelligence and intellectual ability for which she is known at the Bar.

In the vote of thanks, Lord Dyson recalled his own pupil master's explanation of why the Bar was no place for women (they became too emotionally involved, and their high-pitched voices lacked gravitas), observations which, with two outstanding female jurists on the platform, seemed completely laughable today.

The UKIJJL's next event, "Old Hatred, New Challenges: The Legal Response to Antisemitism", takes place in central London on 8 October 2026

Tickets can be obtained here:

<https://www.jewishlawyers.co.uk/event-details-registration/old-hatred-new-challenges-the-legal-response-to-antisemitism>