



HAMAGEN

#10


PESACH
2025/5785

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Magen Avot

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CONTENTS

PESACH 2025/5785

PESACH GREETINGS
 Chief Rabbi Sir Ephraim Mirvis KBE 6
 Rabbi Yoni Golker..... 7
 US President, Michael Goldstein 8
 BoD President, Phil Rosenberg..... 10
 CST CEO, Mark Gardner..... 12
 Magen Avot Chairman, Simon Bentley 14

OUR ESHET CHAYIL – ANOUK ABRAHAMS..... 16

DS TAYMAN INTERVIEW Josh London 20

VOLUNTEERING WITH MDA Liz Kliman 24

MENTAL HEALTH & HALACHA Rabbi Yonatan Rosensweig... 26

HAMUSSAF SUPPLEMENT 29
 10 Year Message from Chief Rabbi Sir Ephraim Mirvis KBE 30
 10 Year Message from Rabbi Yoni Golker 31
 Perspectives from a Nation at War by Rabbi Joel Kenigsberg..... 32
 10th Anniversary Events 34
 Glory in the Aggregate by Natan Maurer 35
 Celebrating Inclusion at Magen Avot by Emma Taylor-Levy 36
 A Jewish Perspective on Freedom by Rebbetzen Dina Golker 38
 Chabura marking the 500th Newsletter by Julian Maurer 40

PESACH IN 1945 Laurie Maurer 43

FROM KRETINGA TO SUNDERLAND Leila Behrman 44

SURVIVAL AND RENEWAL Josh Abeles..... 47

MACCABIAH – THE JEWISH OLYMPICS Simon Bentley... 50

CHAYA LANGERMAN INTERVIEW Dr Fiona Taylor 54

PESACH REFLECTIONS Rabbi Michael Pollak 56

ACHDUT Yehudit Finfer..... 58

BOOK CLUB 60

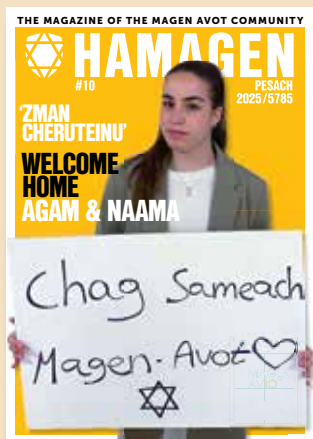
OUR ETHOS 61

CHESED..... 62

MAGEN MINIS / MAXIS..... 64

Y@MA 65

PESACH RECIPES 'Master Baker' Jack Maurer..... 66



20
JOSH LONDON
MEETS DS TAYMAN

29
HAMUSSAF
HAMAGEN
SUPPLEMENT:
CELEBRATING
OUR FIRST
TEN YEARS



24
LIZ KLIMAN
VOLUNTEERS FOR
MDA IN ISRAEL



26
MENTAL HEALTH
RABBI YONATAN
ROSENSWEIG





47
SURVIVAL & RENEWAL - WHY OUR SECOND SEFER TORAH IS SO HEAVY
BY JOSH ABELES



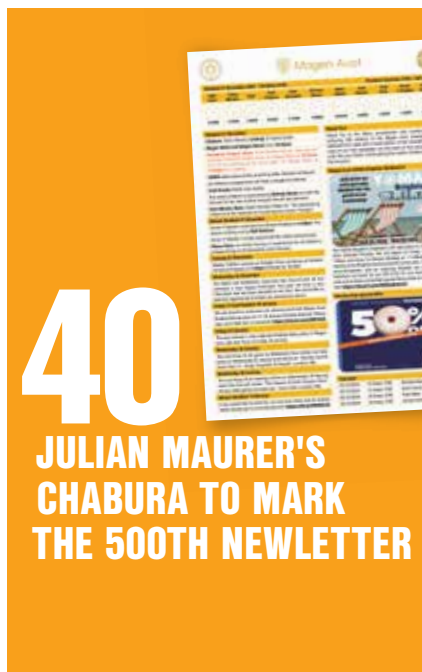
32
RABBI JOEL KENIGSBERG



16
OUR ESHET CHAYIL
ANOUK ABRAHAMS



38
REBBETZEN DINA GOLKER



40
JULIAN MAURER'S CHABURA TO MARK THE 500TH NEWSLETTER



Magen Avot

From the Desk of the Editor
Julian Pollard

This edition of HaMagen highlights the celebrations of the community's 10th Anniversary in June, and the programme of events is highlighted on Page 34. It also includes features on those members who contribute to making Magen Avot unique and special.

To those who have contributed a wide variety of interesting and well-researched articles - many thanks. Likewise, I am very grateful to the entire editorial and design team who have worked so hard in compiling this edition - it takes many hours of their time and commitment. Richard Herman, in particular, continues to bring professional design and layout skills which are self-evident! As always, production has been challenging but also very rewarding.

I welcome Esther Bentley and Emma Taylor-Levy to the proofreading team and editorial board.

To our advertisers and sponsors I express a heartfelt thanks for your support which ensures the production costs are covered. Julian Maurer is key to this success.

Through 10 editions, I hope we continue to showcase the amazing and diverse talent and extraordinary commitment of this community. My aim was always to encourage all our members to express their interests and personalities and enable the community to get to know each other better. I hope that it has also demonstrated how we have put our ethos (on Page 61) into practice since our establishment back in 2015.

Wishing all our readers a Joyful, peaceful and kosher Pesach.



Agam Berger

Naama Levy

Thanks to Dr Chaya Langerman for arranging with Agam's family for the photo for our front page. And of course a really special thank you to Agam!

HAMAGEN

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With thanks to all our contributors

Please Note: All content has been checked and approved for publication by Rabbi Yoni Golker.

A PESACH MESSAGE FROM CHIEF RABBI SIR EPHRAIM MIRVIS KBE

Pesach has always been a festival of paradoxes.

At one and the same time, the festival calls upon us to remember the suffering of our ancestors while slaves in Egypt, but also the joy of their liberation.

The Seder meal, which forms the centrepiece of the Yomtov, illustrates the inherent contradiction perfectly. We eat unleavened matza and bitter herbs, which symbolise our slavery, but we also sing jolly melodies, recline in regal fashion, drink wine or grape juice and dip foods, all of which represent our freedom.

Nothing encapsulates this apparent contradiction better than the hors d'oeuvres served at our tables – a hard-boiled egg in salt water.

The salt water represents our tears, while the egg sends out a profound message. Nearly all other foods, when boiled, get softer. The egg, however, becomes harder. It reminds us that, when the heat is on in life, we can summon our inner resolve and stand firm. Therefore, in the very same dish, we combine pain and fortitude, desolation and hope.

I can hardly recall a Pesach when such mixed feelings are so prevalent. As I sit down to write this message, we are witnessing the extraordinary highs of hostages being returned to the loving embrace of their families and the agonising lows of discovering the depths of their suffering and the fate of those who tragically did not return alive.

Yet, in Jewish tradition, we never hesitate to highlight optimism and joy, even in the midst of our pain and sadness, nor do we shy away from recalling the deep traumas of our past at moments of great celebration.

For this reason, the saddest day on our

“ As I sit down to write this message, we are witnessing the extraordinary highs of hostages being returned to the loving embrace of their families and the agonising lows of discovering the depths of their suffering and the fate of those who tragically did not return alive.

calendar, Tisha Be'Av, is called Mo'ed – festival, by our Prophets, in anticipation of the day being transformed in the future to become the happiest of all days. Together with that, the Torah instructs us to celebrate all major Jewish festivals in memory of our exodus from Egypt and, at Jewish weddings, a glass is broken to remember the destruction of our Temples and all subsequent Jewish suffering.

We do this because it is from within the tragedies of our past that our resolve to build a better future is forged. The depths of our pain and the heights of



our joy are therefore inextricably and permanently linked.

This is why, even with our ongoing deep anxiety about the welfare of the State of Israel and, indeed, for world Jewry, we will enthusiastically celebrate Pesach with the prayer that joy will prevail over pain and the ultimate redemption will draw near.

Valerie joins me in extending our very warm and best wishes to you all for a Chag Kasher Vesameach. ■



Office of The
CHIEF RABBI

A PESACH MESSAGE FROM RABBI YONI GOLKER

We live in the best of times, and yet, we live in the worst of times. In the West, we are blessed with extraordinary levels of freedom and prosperity. Torah study, mitzvah observance, and our awe of Hashem can be pursued with minimal hindrance. We have unprecedented access to אָרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל, and yet, we are faced with an ever-growing assault from enemies who seek to destroy us, both physically and ideologically.

The past 18 months have been harrowing for us all, as the Jewish people have witnessed unspeakable tragedies. The war in יִשְׂרָאֵל, marked by shocking violence, deepened our connection to the land and people of Israel in ways we could never have anticipated. This conflict has shaken us to our core. It has reminded us, painfully, that our survival is never guaranteed and that the promise of גְּאֻלָּה is still bound with struggle and suffering.

We are also confronted by subversive ideologies, disguised under banners of “truth,” “cosmopolitanism,” and “equality,” that seek to undermine the very values that have sustained us for millennia. These ideologies erode the moral fabric of society and challenge the foundations of תּוֹרָה and מִצְוֹת. We are caught between the tension of living in a world of unprecedented opportunity, while also facing the ever-present threat of erosion to our identity, our values, and our survival as a Jewish people.

Our tradition teaches us that this is the era of גְּאֻלָּה – redemption – yet it is also the era of גְּלוּת – exile. We are standing at the precipice, poised for גְּאֻלָּה, yet still deeply entrenched in the afflictions of גְּלוּת. The metaphor of מַצָּה, which we read about in the הַגְּדָה, encapsulates this duality. מַצָּה is the bread of גְּאֻלָּה, the bread of redemption and sovereignty. It is also the bread of affliction, representing גְּלוּת and the oppression we have endured throughout history.

The סֵדֶר story, which we recount each year, is not merely a tale of past redemption, but a blueprint for

understanding our present condition. Just as our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt, so too are we called to yearn for, and work towards, our own גְּאֻלָּה. The themes of suffering and redemption resonate more deeply this year, as we continue to feel the weight of the Jewish people's suffering in יִשְׂרָאֵל, coupled with our eternal hope for גְּאֻלָּה.

As we approach the festival of פֶּסַח, let us reflect on the deep significance of the holiday. פֶּסַח is a time to contemplate our journey as a people – one of suffering and salvation, of exile and redemption. It is a time to gather around the סֵדֶר table, to engage in meaningful conversations, to share our hopes for the future, and to perform מִצְוֹת with joy and dedication. Let us remember that פֶּסַח is not only a holiday steeped in symbolism, but one that provides us with practical opportunities to connect with our heritage, our people, and our Creator.

In these difficult times, we are reminded of the importance of community, of the role each of us plays in ensuring the continuity of תּוֹרָה and מִצְוֹת. The mitzvah of teaching our children the story of the מִצְרַיִם is of paramount importance – ensuring that they understand not only the history but the ongoing significance of our struggle for survival and redemption. As we sit together at our סֵדֶר tables, let us teach our children the deeper meanings of פֶּסַח, the lessons of resilience, faith, and hope, and the profound connection between us and the land of יִשְׂרָאֵל.

While this פֶּסַח comes in the shadow of immense hardship, it is also an opportunity for renewal. Let us embrace the dual symbolism of מַצָּה, which represents both our suffering and our potential for גְּאֻלָּה. Let us rise to the challenge of our times, knowing that we are not alone. The promise of Hashem's presence with us is eternal, and we continue to walk forward with faith, courage, and unity.

Before concluding, I would like to pay tribute to Simon Bentley, our outgoing chairman. Simon's sterling leadership, unwavering dedication, and personal



kindness have made an immeasurable impact on Magen Avot. He was not only a guide but also a friend, who warmly brought family Golker into this wonderful community. His vision for our growth and his sensitivity in addressing the needs of our community will be missed, as will the invaluable support of Esther. Their contributions have touched us all, and we are deeply grateful for their leadership and friendship. We will miss them both and look forward to their regular visits!

I would also like to express my deep gratitude to Chaya Langerman, our outgoing Women's Officer. Chaya's dedication, leadership, and passion have made an enormous impact on our community. Chaya has led with such warmth, vision, and commitment, and her efforts have been felt by everyone. Her tireless work in organizing events and speakers have truly created a sense of unity and connection. We are deeply grateful for everything Chaya has done during her time in this role.

Dina joins me in wishing you and your families a חַג כֶּשֶׁר וְשִׂמְחָה. ■



Magen Avot

A PESACH MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED SYNAGOGUE MICHAEL GOLDSTEIN

In my final Pesach message as President of this wonderful charity I want to share something that might surprise you: a provocative piece of writing from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1808-1888).

Rav Hirsch was a principal protagonist in the foundation of a Judaism that is, like the United Synagogue, both proudly orthodox and consciously engaged in the wider world.

In 1837 he wrote something which remains shocking today: "If I had the power I would provisionally close all synagogues for a hundred years. Do not tremble at the thought of it, Jewish heart. What would happen? Jews without synagogues, desiring to remain such, would be forced to concentrate on a Jewish life and a Jewish home. The Jewish officials connected with the synagogue would have to look to the only opportunity now open to them - to teach young and old how to live a Jewish life and how to build a Jewish home. All synagogues closed by Jewish hands would constitute the strongest protest against the abandonment of the Torah in home and life."

What does Rav Hirsch mean? His words carry additional resonance given the difficult memories of COVID-19. How can a rabbi - of all people - dream of closing synagogues?

I believe his words still resonate today. Shabbat morning services are seen by some as the be-all and end-all of Judaism. It's when we see the biggest crowds in our shuls, it's when we welcome thousands of children across our communities.

Don't get me wrong, *davening* in shul with a *minyán* is crucial. As Rabbi Sacks

zt'l said, "For it is in the synagogue that belonging becomes believing." But Shabbat morning is only one access point to Jewish life. Successful communities offer multiple opportunities to learn, lead and grow Jewishly. But studies show that what happens at home has the greatest impact on Jewish identity. This is what Rav Hirsch is teaching us.

He is protesting against the idea that dipping into Judaism once a week in shul is enough. On the contrary, he is saying, Judaism has to be lived daily at home, at work and on holiday. We have to find regular touchpoints to inspire our children and grandchildren - and ourselves! - to make Judaism meaningful and relevant to our lives.

At Pesach we have the opportunity to supercharge our Jewish engagement. Pesach is *the* 'home festival'. Seder nights are the most observed Jewish ritual in the world. 80% of British Jews and 97% of Israelis attend a Seder night.

Seder nights - part theatre, part ritual, part banquet - make the story of the Exodus come alive. They are the electric car equivalent of a superfast charger, rapidly filling us to capacity with Jewish energy. But as we drive away after Pesach we have to find regular charging stations to avoid running out of battery. This is Rav Hirsch's message for today.

Shul life will always remain important to the United Synagogue and our members. But through our work in Jewish schools, with young people through Tribe and our education programmes for adults, we will continue to find new ways to inspire people of all ages to live lives as committed Jews.

Chag kasher v'sameach! ■





ARE YOU STRUGGLING AT HOME WITH EVERYDAY TASKS?

Our Independent Living Advisory Service is an occupational therapist led service which helps people to maintain independence in their own home.

It's free for any adult within the Jewish community who has a physical disability or vision impairment and lives within the M25.

Our occupational therapists will visit and provide a report with advice and recommendations for aids or home adaptations designed to help with everyday tasks, such as:

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A PESACH MESSAGE FROM BoD PRESIDENT PHIL ROSENBERG

Pesach is the festival of freedom, where we celebrate our departure from Egypt. None of us needs to be reminded of the bitter parallels we have been experiencing since October 7th 2023, with hundreds of hostages taken on that awful day and held in captivity in awful conditions.

Since the signing of phase one of the ceasefire agreement we have experienced some joy and much heartbreak. There has been celebration as hostages have emerged from their ordeal to be reunited with their families – among them fellow Brit Emily Damari. There has been concern at the condition of hostages who were released in ugly Hamas ceremonies emaciated and unwell. And of course, we all mourned as the coffins of hostages murdered by their captors were received by their distraught loved ones, including the precious Bibas family and Tsachi Idan, cousin of Board of Deputies' staff member Adam Maanit. It has been our absolute determination to campaign until the last hostage is out; with our Adopt a Hostage campaign and vigils outside Downing Street and the Scottish Parliament.

Since October 7th we have all suffered a surge of antisemitism. The UK community needs to feel safe, secure and protected. This is why we have set up a Commission on Antisemitism, led by the Government's Independent Adviser on Antisemitism Lord Mann and former Defence Secretary Penny Mordaunt. The Commission will investigate the rise of antisemitism in the UK and make far-reaching recommendations for how to fight antisemitism on our streets, in university campuses, in the media, online and in our workplaces.

Another key pledge I made in my

“ We have gone through one of the toughest periods for the Jewish people in our living memory, but we have resilience in our DNA and we will come back stronger.”

election campaign was to tackle extremism and enhance interfaith relations with the Muslim community. Last year we launched the Optimistic Alliance between Jewish and Muslim communities in which we are tackling anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim hatred; challenging extremism and supporting mainstream voices; defending shared religious freedoms; confronting societal challenges like poverty and climate change; and finding ways to engage better over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I was proud to join rabbis from across the UK Jewish community as we presented the far-reaching Drumlanrig Muslim-Jewish Accords to King Charles III in February. There is a long way to go but we have made a determined start.

I have spoken about the problems we face. However, we should also be celebrating our community and its achievements. I am pushing forward



plans for a British Jewish Culture Month, with a proposed launch in 2026. In order to inoculate the public against the virus of antisemitism, we need to celebrate and educate about the contribution of our community to our country's society, economy and culture. I hope there will be much more to celebrate in the coming year.

We have gone through one of the toughest periods for the Jewish people in our living memory, but we have resilience in our DNA and we will come back stronger.

It just remains for me to wish Pesach Sameach to you and your families from everyone at the Board of Deputies.

Am Yisrael Chai! ■





Chag Pesach Sameach from everyone at CST

After everything we have been through lately, our Pesach will feel very special this year. The Haggadah tells us of persecution, redemption and hope for a better future. The story impacts us, because these things have continued throughout Jewish life: but here we are, facing the challenges together with courage.

At CST, our only mission is to give strength and comfort to British Jews. We do this so that you and your family can lead the life you choose.

Since that dreadful day of 7 October, CST has faced unprecedented demands and challenges, but despite it all, Jewish life has intensified and grown stronger than ever before. CST has been very proud of its part in making this happen, but we need you to continue supporting us too.

Over the last 18 months, many hundreds of men and women have joined CST following intensive security training. This means we can better protect our community, making it stronger and more confident.

Our commitment to you is constant. Thank you for placing your trust in us. The future remains uncertain, but together, we will keep on facing whatever lies ahead.

There are many ways you can support CST. You can contribute by becoming a volunteer, reporting antisemitism and donating to us.

From all of us here at CST, we wish you a

Chag Pesach Sameach

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SCAN TO SIGN UP

A FAREWELL MESSAGE FROM OUR CHAIRMAN SIMON BENTLEY

As I prepare to step down as chairman of Magen Avot, I find myself reflecting on an incredible journey – one that I have been truly honoured to share with you over the past five years.

Leading this community has been a privilege. I have been fortunate to work alongside Rabbi and Rebbetzen Kenigsberg, Rabbi and Rebbetzen Golker, our dedicated executive and council members, and – most importantly – you, the heart and soul of Magen Avot.

Looking back, I remember that Shabbat in February 2020, when Joy Kay and I stepped into our new roles as chairman and vice chair. We marked the occasion with a celebratory kiddush (and, if memory serves, a whisky selection that was far too generous!). Since then, we have grown, evolved, and built something truly special together.

Among our many shared accomplishments, I take particular pride in how we pulled together as a caring community during the challenges of COVID-19, ensuring that our shul remained a source of strength, even when its doors had to close.

We also took bold steps in tzedakah and social action, from championing the Uyghur cause to supporting a unit of IDF veterans. We deepened our commitment to learning, with an incredible range of outstanding guest speakers, launched innovative programmes, and celebrated milestones, like the 500th edition of our newsletter.

Throughout my time as chairman, few moments have been as moving as our community's adoption of two hostages, Agam Berger and Naama Levy, for whom we prayed continually. Their names became part of our tefillot, our conversations, and our thoughts. We

shared in the collective pain of their captivity, and when they were finally released, we rejoiced together. It was a profound reminder of the strength of Jewish unity – that no matter how far away, no one is ever forgotten.

And, of course, we danced through tears this Simchat Torah, standing in solidarity with Moshe and Yonatan Amar as we remembered their beloved Shirat-Yam.

The list of what we have built together is long – but what matters most is the sense of warmth, unity, and purpose that defines Magen Avot.

Though I will no longer serve as chairman, Esther and I remain proud members of this extraordinary community, and we look forward to celebrating many more moments together.

With warm best wishes,
Simon. ■



The list of what we have built together is long – but what matters most is the sense of warmth, unity, and purpose that defines Magen Avot.



Magen Avot

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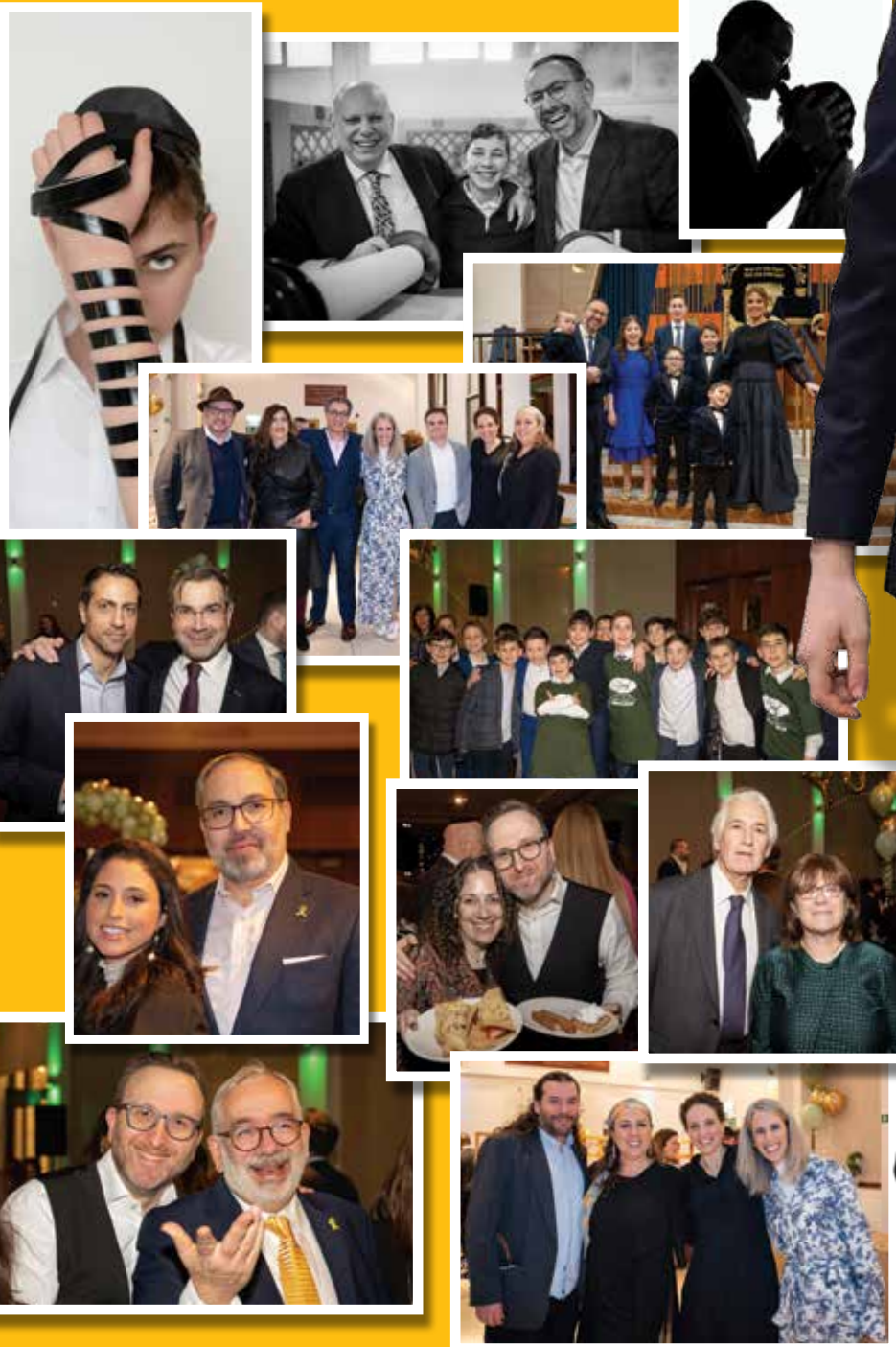


YOSEF GOLKER'S BAR MITZVAH A MAGEN AVOT SIMCHA

We are so grateful to the Magen Avot community for sharing in Yosef's Bar Mitzvah celebrations. It was a privilege to mark this milestone with our kehilla, our extended family. As I said in my drasha, this wasn't just our family simcha—it was our Magen Avot family simcha. We were delighted that so many joined us to dance and

celebrate on Thursday night, and it was our honour to extend the invitation to the entire kehilla. Your warmth, joy, and kindness meant so much to us. Thank you for making this occasion truly special. May we share many more smachot together!

Rabbi Yoni and Rebbetzen Dina, Yosef, Leila, Abie, Gadi, Herschel, and Yehuda Golker



HELP AT HAND IF YOU ARE STRUGGLING AT HOME DUE TO YOUR PHYSICAL DISABILITY OR VISION IMPAIRMENT

The story of Pesach is one of liberation and the journey to freedom. In 2025, as many of us prepare our homes to celebrate this festival, there are people in our community struggling to live independently in their own homes due to a lack of support and access to vital aids and adaptations.

Whilst government policies have increasingly focused on supporting people to live independently in their homes for as long as possible, waiting lists to access support, aids and adaptations can be extremely challenging.

If we, as a society, are going to encourage people to remain living independently in their own homes, then we need to provide them with the support they need to ensure that they are safe and have a good quality of life.

Jewish Blind & Disabled's Independent Living Advisory Service is another example of where we as a community are stepping in to plug the gaps for underfunded and

under-resourced government services.

Thanks to funding from our principal supporter, Wohl Legacy, alongside generous individuals from across the community, the charity has been able to offer, grow and develop this service to ensure that everyone who is eligible for the service can access it and receive timely support.

Accessing the service couldn't be easier, with a simple online or printed form to complete. Once the form is complete, a visit from an occupational therapist is arranged. After the visit, the occupational therapist will send a full report of recommendations for any aids or home adaptations they think will help the individual. Some of the items might be provided by the local authority, and if larger adaptations are needed, the service can help clients apply for a Disabled Facilities Grant.

The service is open to Jewish adults living with a physical disability or vision impairment within the M25. ■



If we, as a society, are going to encourage people to remain living independently in their own homes, then we need to provide them with the support they need to ensure that they are safe and have a good quality of life.

Michele's Story

Michele's health suddenly declined, and she couldn't walk so had to use a wheelchair for the first time in her life. As well as facing a life-changing diagnosis, Michele, who is in her 60s and lives in North East London, also had to tackle the very real difficulties of using a wheelchair in a home not designed to accommodate one.

Not only could she no longer get into her kitchen, but she was also finding it tricky to manoeuvre her wheelchair in the bathroom, with her chair bashing tiles off the wall each time she went in.

Our occupational therapist visited and identified Michele's needs and supported her to secure funding from her local authority to install a fully accessible wet room – and to adapt her kitchen so she could get in it again.

Michele said: "I was really struggling in my own home. I'm delighted that JBD's 'at-home' service means I don't have to leave my lovely flat. I could have all my doors widened and my kitchen and bathroom customised to accommodate my wheelchair."



If you or anyone you know would benefit from Jewish Blind & Disabled's Independent Living Advisory Service, please contact toni@jbd.org or call 020 8371 6611 ext. 620. For more information about Jewish Blind & Disabled, visit www.jbd.org

OUR ESHET CHAYIL ANOUK ABRAHAMMS

In February on Shabbat Parshat Beshalach, Anouk Abrahams was presented with an award as our Eshet Chayil as a mark of recognition of her outstanding contribution to Magen Avot this year. Her Eshet Chayil address to a packed shul was both emotional and memorable.

“When Chaya told me about the award, my first reaction was to laugh because I thought she had made a mistake. Then I saw my name and thought it was a bit like when you receive an email telling you that you have won a million-dollar prize to be redeemed from an account in Nigeria, and then you remember that you have never played, and also you don't have a massive Nigerian connection anyway.

“I do have a connection to Magen Avot though. But this is the most perplexing bit to me. I had never really liked going to shul. Growing up in Paris, Sephardi, as a girl then a woman, in shul I felt sidelined, like an understudy for a minor role. I felt the role that was expected from me was dissonant with what I had to offer.

“My experiences of collectivity and community are at best very cynical. I never felt in a million years I would be a ‘ladies guild type of person,’ and at worst not a very happy one ... that is until Patti Adler made a shidduch for us with Magen Avot.

“When Chaya Langerman asked me if

I would accept the title of Eshet Chayil, I brainstormed with myself. Receiving a gift, an honour or a favour can bring very mixed feelings. Elation of course to be chosen, but also fear, shame, embarrassment.

“Rashi, in a comment about forbidden relations in Vayikra, uses the word ‘hesed’ as a synonym for embarrassment. Every act of giving is accompanied by an act of taking. R. Moshe Miller, develops this idea in ‘Rising Moon,’ a comment on the Book of Ruth and calls it the cruelty of kindness. He takes this paradox from Talmud Yerushalmi who names that feeling, nahama d’kisufa, ‘the bread of embarrassment.’ By giving bread, the state of equality between the giver and the recipient is damaged.

“In Beshalach, there are countless examples of this ambivalent state from the B’nei Yisrael. I’ll name two. After so many trials, and miracles, the people have finally crossed the sea on dry land. Surely there should be an overwhelming amount of gratitude? But when Moshe breaks into a song, it says, ‘Az Yashir Moshe’ For Rashi, the ‘Az’ exemplifies a moment of choice or hesitation.

“Avivah Gottlieb explains that the song

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When Chaya asked me if I would accept the title of Eshet Chayil, I brainstormed with myself. Receiving a gift, an honour or a favour can bring very mixed feelings.

is less an expression of undiluted gratitude than an expression of bewilderment. Simple words of praise could not encompass the reality of the massacres, the physical suffering, the fear on the one hand and the joy of God’s salvation on the other.



Indeed the conflicts between din, rigorous justice, and rachamim, mercy, are a central theme of the song. Death and life, suffering and joy, justice and mercy is wider than us and them.

“It is not difficult to transpose these emotions to the process and the reality of getting our hostages back.

“Similarly, when the B’nei Yisrael receive the manna from the sky, there is this question: ‘Man Hu?’ What is it? There seem to be more questions and complaints than a true sense of gratitude towards God. Manna was puzzling, because of its shape, its taste that was different to what they had in Egypt, but also for each and every one. But the most puzzling fact is the kind of relationship it represents. Manna is the expression of loving kindness from God to the B’nei Yisrael for choosing him and following him into the unknown. It is a collective and individual token of love.

“The power of the connection between God and his people precedes words, explanations, basic manners and even acceptance. The circularity of love and connection, in my mind, is what breaks the duality of giver/receiver. Love stems from the act of giving, and giving breeds love. Indeed the Hebrew word for love, ‘ahavah’, is rooted in the word ‘hav,’ which means to give. In a nutshell, this is how I resolved my inner conflicts about standing here today.

“Today is less about receiving a distinction than a chibouk, an accolade from my beloved community. This is also an opportunity for me to be schmaltzy and talk about love, which is beyond even being grateful. Being here to me means a million loving connections.

“Here are a few: first my connection to God. Also my father has transmitted to me a deep sense of faith which has carried me through life. Up until recently, it had been a very internal, personal, bilateral relationship. Then, the connection and the trust of my very Cartesian husband who accepted my wish to uproot our comfortable lives in Brussels for a vague promise of a better Jewish life for our family, and to take this leap of faith together.

“I can’t help but feel an infinite gratitude and connection for each of those who have contributed to materialise this vision we had for our family. It is not just friendship we have found here: It is a connection as much as an inspiration. Earlier, I talked about the ‘shidduch’ Patti made between Magen Avot and my family. It is no small feat that five very independent and discerning people should individually, each for their own reasons, fall in love with a shul.

“Magen Avot is my first experience of seeing God in the work of the community. I cannot get over the care that every individual pours into this community, each according to their own talent and inclination. I have always found it difficult to picture what the Beit Hamikdash meant to each Jew. I struggled to connect the dots between the minutiae of every detail with the feelings of joy and elation people felt in its presence.

“However, when I think about Magen Avot, I picture its members officiating and fulfilling their different roles and missions for the community with humility, care and devotion. The minutiae is not boring, because when I observe closely, I can see the essence of each personality shining through the repetitive task they are performing.

“I dream that the awe I feel in the presence of my community in action, is a

little piece of what the third Beit Hamikdash may look like, a sense of ‘shelemout’ with God and amongst the people. At Magen Avot, I have found the puzzle I belong to, my ‘makom’. A place where I can dare feeling like an asset and being vulnerable without feeling exposed. A place where I can give and receive without shame because I feel it’s ‘mishpacha’. A place that shines even brighter than the sum of its parts.” ■

ANOUK ABRAHAMS, OUR ESHET CHAYIL

In discussion with Fiona Taylor

Moving to a new country is never easy, but for Anouk, it has been a journey of discovery, resilience and community. Born in Paris to a family of Jewish immigrants, Anouk grew up navigating two homes after her parents’ divorce. When she was 17, her father moved to Israel, and she began travelling there frequently. By her early 20s, she had moved to Brussels to pursue a master’s degree in European law, where she met her husband, Darren, at a Jewish student ball. That meeting set the course for the next 17 years of their lives.

Anouk’s career took her from working at the European Commission to qualifying for the bar, but life had other plans. With three children born in quick succession, she stepped away from law, realising that European law wasn’t well-suited to part-time work. Meanwhile, their community in Brussels, though rich in friendships, felt increasingly secular, making it challenging to raise their children with the traditions and values they cherished.

As their children grew, Anouk and Darren faced a difficult decision: stay in a city where their faith felt isolated, or seek a new home where their values could flourish. Encouraged by long-time chavruta (study partner) Susie Weisz, Anouk started exploring life in the UK. The idea of moving felt daunting – perhaps even “mad,” as some friends suggested – but the decision was fuelled by a deeper understanding of her own family’s history. Both her parents had been forced to leave their birth countries, Tunisia and Algeria, due to rising tensions and political shifts. For Anouk, the ability to choose where to build her future was a privilege, not just a challenge.

Once in the UK, the practicalities of life took centre stage. Darren still worked in Brussels, commuting back and forth, while Anouk sought a school that could accommodate all three children. With no permanent address, state school enrolment proved impossible, but fortunately, spaces opened up at Nancy Reuben Primary School. They found a home nearby and slowly began building their new life.

Brexit had made Anouk’s expertise in European law less relevant, and after years away from the field, she wasn’t keen on starting over. Instead, she decided to follow her passion. With Darren away frequently, she took a leap into art – something she had always loved but never pursued. This creative exploration unlocked a confidence she hadn’t known she had. Soon after, she realised her true calling: psychotherapy, particularly for children. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a moment of introspection, and at 40, Anouk decided life was too short not to do what she truly wanted.

Now in the final stages of her psychotherapy training, Anouk sees several clients each week while preparing for her clinical exam, which will allow her to work with children professionally. Though the work is rewarding, it is also demanding, and she is exploring ways to use her skills in different capacities, such as consulting or facilitating groups. She is also deeply engaged in Jewish learning, having studied halacha extensively but now gravitating towards more philosophical and introspective texts, such as Rav Dessler’s writings on free will.

Community has played a vital role in Anouk’s journey. She initially

struggled to find her place in London, feeling that many long-established communities were difficult to integrate into. But through study partnerships and friendships – such as her chavruta in the Phone & Learn programme – she found a space where she could grow intellectually and spiritually.

Magen Avot became a key part of her life, offering a pioneering and welcoming environment where she felt she could contribute and belong. What she loves most about Magen Avot is its openness and inclusivity, where newcomers are embraced and given opportunities to shape and participate in the community. Unlike older, more established shuls, she found that Magen Avot had a sense of dynamism, where members, regardless of background, could play an active role in building and enriching the community.

Anouk also appreciates the warmth and diversity of the people she has met in London, even though building deep friendships took time. She values the balance between tradition and progressiveness that she has found in her circles, particularly in spaces where women are encouraged to take leadership in learning and community involvement. For her, this has been a significant shift from past experiences, and one that has reinforced her sense of belonging.

Anouk’s journey is one of adaptation, courage and self-discovery. From Paris to Brussels, and now London, she has built a life rich in community, learning, and purpose. Whether through her art, her work as a therapist, or her role as a mother, she continues to create a home wherever she goes. ■

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THAT'S THE SPIRIT

*A chat with
Danny Saltman and
Saul Taylor of DS Tayman
by Josh London*



Saul Taylor



Danny Saltman

In the highly competitive world of whisky, DS Tayman has distinguished itself by offering distinctive, high-quality single malt Scotch whiskies that deliver excellent value and, most importantly, great pleasure. Oh, and it is also kosher certified.

Launched in 2020 by Danny Saltman and Saul Taylor, DS Tayman whiskies have been racking up industry awards—from IWSC (International Wine & Spirit Competition) and the World Whiskies Awards—and attracting a loyal and increasingly global following (across 19 markets so far). On behalf of *HaMagen*, I took the opportunity a few weeks ago to meet with the DS Tayman team at their Mill Hill office, to learn more about their approach to whisky.

“Danny and I started working together, trading whisky, in the beginning of 2018,” explained Saul, a seasoned trading professional with experience at Bank of New York, ConvergeX, and Visium Asset Management.

Already long-time friends, Saul and Danny partnered to co-found Dalkeith Brokerage, DS Tayman’s parent company. Their brokerage provides casks and tankers for trade. While Saul’s background was in trade and investment management, Danny’s experience—now over 20 years—has been in wines and spirits.

“Our respective strengths and expertise balances out nicely,” noted Danny, “and kind of works quite well. We call it a family now, and it’s not just the two of us,

“

We recognised an opportunity in the market — our niche was the kosher angle.



it's everybody here."

The rest of their team are whisky industry veteran Ronnie Routledge, as head of whisky, Jonathan Cohen, as finance and operations manager, and Yael Schlagman, as head of marketing.

"Really, we were sort of, dipping our toe into various bits of whisky stuff," Saul explained, "trading in whisky within the industry, to other traders, to distilleries, to blenders, and the like, and we've just been dealing in whisky casks and tankers of whisky, and that has given us a really long reach within the trade."

Within a couple of years, they decided to advance their activities further. "We have the links in Scotland, and we had Danny's connections in the alcohol world," Saul explained, "So we rolled the dice with DS Tayman. We recognised an opportunity in the market—our niche was the kosher angle." That was just their launching pad, from which they've set a steady course.

The "kosher angle," as Saul put it, is that all DS Tayman whiskies—and these are all whiskies that have seen the inside of

a wine cask—are certified kosher under three hashgachos: the Orthodox Union (OU), the Kashrut Division of the London Beth Din (KLBD) and the MKL Kashrus Authority, the independent agency of Rav Akiva Osher Padwa (who is also Director of Certification for KLBD).

For those who do not follow the potential kashrus concerns related to whisky, the issue that gets the greatest attention is the use of wood casks that previously contained wine. In commercial terms, unless wine is certified 'kosher'—which effectively means that it is verified/approved by a reliable kashrus authority as 'produced by Shabbos observant Jews' and with the total exclusion of unauthorized handling until the wine has been appropriately sealed and safely released from production controls—it is deemed NOT kosher. The use of casks that previously contained non-kosher wine raises, as the kosher certification professionals typically like to phrase it, "kashrus concerns" about whether the prohibited wine renders the whisky not-kosher.

"Whiskey which has been matured in wine casks has been subject to detailed Halachic consideration by major poskim," the KLBD website notes, "who did not forbid its consumption." The KLBD website goes on to note that Wine Cask Finishes, "a secondary process in which fully aged and mature whisky is returned to specially commissioned and primed wine casks for a further period of maturation," are distinct and "may not be covered by all the aforementioned heterim [leniencies] and accordingly some may wish to avoid products so labelled."

There has been great debate over these issues, resulting in increasing avoidance of wine cask whiskies across parts of the kosher-consumer world, especially in the USA and Israel.

"We do not hold a view on whether wine-cask whisky is kosher or not," Saul said. "Rather," explained Danny, "we are interested in providing whisky without this ambiguity — whisky that can be enjoyed by anyone, without regard to the kosher status of wine-cask whisky."



“We want to give consumers the ability to keep to the highest standards of kashrut, whilst not compromising on the quality,” Saul added, “so that everyone is able to experience the highest levels of what Scotch whisky has to offer.”

There are a handful of kosher-certified whiskies on the market, but DS Tayman remains the only brand producing kosher-certified wine-cask-finished whiskies. This is their unique selling proposition.

Fortunately, DS Tayman consistently produces exceptional whisky—which also happens to be kosher.

One of DS Tayman’s defining characteristics is its uncompromising commitment to quality. “We do not compromise on quality,” Saul emphasized. “Quality drives everything that we do. We will not release a whisky unless and until we are completely satisfied with it. We want our brand to be synonymous with exceptional whisky.”

The company’s rigorous wood management policy is central to this commitment. “We go to extreme lengths to source the highest quality casks,” Danny said. “Sometimes, this means making difficult financial decisions, such as paying premiums for what we believe to be better quality casks or absorbing the cost of experiments that didn’t fully meet our standards...Sometimes we start maturing whiskies and decide—well into the process—that the marriage of whisky and wood just isn’t developing the way we’d hoped.”

“We’d rather take the financial hit than risk diminishing our brand’s reputation for excellence,” Saul added.

“We make a point of building in a lot of room for experimentation and strive to be nimble,” explained Danny, “so much of what we do is about trial and error. Whisky finishes take time for exploration and time for maturation”—and, he explained, for assessment, adjustment and adaptation.

An example is their Linkwood Peated Edition. This 12-year-old single malt was initially matured in a refill bourbon barrel, then finished in a cask that had held kosher wine from Israel’s Flam Winery, and finally transferred to a Caol Ila whisky cask.

“The Flam casks were of great quality, but the interaction wasn’t quite enough for us,” Danny explained. “So, we took the sweet and smooth Linkwood, which now also had a fruity, spicy Flam wine barrel overlay, and transferred the whisky to a Caol Ila cask, adding a layer of peat that elevated everything to another level.”

With only one cask available, they released it as an exclusive charity bottling. Following the events of 7 October, DS Tayman felt compelled to support Israel. “We are a proudly Jewish company,” Saul said. “We wanted to contribute in some way.”

Thus, the Linkwood Peated Edition became a special release of just 144 bottles, with 100% of the proceeds—£15,000—going to United Hatzalah.



Quality drives everything that we do. We will not release a whisky unless and until we are completely satisfied with it.

DS Tayman’s agility, unwavering commitment to quality, and mastery of their craft make it clear that they are poised for long-term success in the independent whisky bottling space. If even a fraction of their bold ambitions—discussed freely over some truly exceptional drams in their office—becomes reality, they will further elevate their brand and expand the kosher market, all while upholding the exceptional quality and value their customers have come to expect. ■

DS TAYMAN IS PROUD TO SUPPORT MAGEN AVOT



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VOLUNTEERING FOR MAGEN DAVID ADOM

by Liz Kilman



“

I thought that it would be a good idea to take a break from the stress of work... to go and work in an ambulance!

During the winter holidays this year I headed off to Israel on a four-week MASA programme to volunteer for Magen David Adom (MDA). With the current situation, MASA have extended the age for their programmes which previously were aimed at people up to 25 to age 50. I thought that it would be a good idea to take a break from the stress of work ... to go and work in an ambulance!

There are several different organisations that provide the programmes for MASA and this was the first time “Destination Israel,” the one I chose, had offered this. It was a bit

disorganised! They told us that we would be volunteering around four to five hours a day so we would have lots of free time, and they organised various trips around Israel and extra volunteering in agriculture. Unfortunately, they were wrong! We soon learned that we would receive 60 hours of training from MASA over two weeks, followed by an intense schedule of at least eight-hour shifts on the ambulances.

Our trainer was excellent – although even though we trained for eight hours most days, we didn’t receive all the training we should have and were left to cram a lot of information from presentations we hadn’t received before taking the exam. A relaxing break – right! We were now “trained first responders” and I gained experience by practicing on ... real patients!

Israel has two types of ambulances: a white one (where we were based), which is staffed by a trained medic who is the driver and volunteer first responders or EMTs or sometimes other medics who are not drivers; and a yellow one, called a mobile intensive care unit, which is staffed by advanced paramedics who can give medication and intubate patients.

To be honest, I wanted to do something to help Israel after October 7 but, although ambulance medics help people, I’m not sure this was the best use of my time as it seems most of the time they could manage well without foreign volunteers. Many Israelis had volunteered, and normally I was with one other volunteer at least who was more experienced than I. However, all Israeli members of the public I met were pleased we were coming to offer support and were holding them in mind.

MDA medics and volunteers were very friendly and keen to help us learn and practice our skills. That is until the one day when it was just me and a newly trained medic/driver in the ambulance. Unfortunately many of the ambulances are old and often equipment doesn’t



2nd window down where sniper shot from circled



Magen David Adom ambulance



Sderot Menorah



Inside of ambulance



Memorial at Sderot police station



A soldier during Chanukah

work. Nothing in our ambulance worked properly; there was no monitor for pulse and blood pressure and I had to do these all manually; the bed was broken and even the tablet to get us to the patient was faulty! MDA is really in need of funds for new equipment. Unfortunately, ambulances were specially targeted by terrorists on October 7, and 36 members were killed. I met members of MDA who had lost colleagues.

I am also not sure what possessed me to want to be in an ambulance driving at speed on blue lights through Tel Aviv traffic – when Israeli driving can be somewhat anxiety-provoking for me. I managed to experience two accidents in ambulances ... when we were driving at slow speeds!

One night, I managed to squeeze in a trip to an army base in the South and helped with a barbecue for the soldiers. This was led by the base's training officer who showed us a mock-up of a Gaza village, and told us to switch torches off and try to make our way through the narrow alleyways in the dark, imagining

Hamas firing from inside the buildings – and this brought it home. They also took us in a reconstruction of a tunnel. We stood in the pitch black, damp tunnel in the cold desert night to experience what it is like for the hostages held there.

After the training, in between shifts, we also visited the Nova Festival site, Sderot and a kibbutz. The Nova site was obviously very poignant and moving, but what struck me was that there were people from all areas of Israeli society paying their respects. There was someone writing a Sefer Torah and I was able to contribute a letter to this. In Sderot we saw a memorial on the site of a police station which had been overtaken by terrorists and the toilet window in an apartment across the road that a local who was a trained sniper was able to shoot from to eliminate terrorists. The police station was bullet- and bomb-proof so it was not possible to blow up the terrorists inside. Some police had been killed and others were on the roof. They were rescued by helicopter and a rocket fired to destroy the station with the terrorists inside. We also saw the regular

playgrounds in Sderot, which are bomb shelters as there is only 30 seconds notice for a missile and, unfortunately, they received many, even before October 7. There was even a large menorah made of spent missiles. At the kibbutz, we were told how they had seen terrorists in jeeps at their gate on October 7 who turned and went elsewhere, but they had lost friends in neighbouring kibbutzim. Terrorists shot down by a female tank unit had plans to attack their kibbutz, which is perhaps why it remained unscathed.

Our MASA programme comprised mainly teenagers, many from the U.S. but also Peru, Chile and Argentina. Some had very little previous connection to Israel or Judaism, yet all were motivated to give up their time and try to help following October 7.

There are many volunteer opportunities with MASA, including an eight-day tour for 18-50 year olds, and many other opportunities to volunteer even for a day through different organisations. Details can be found on the Sword of Iron Facebook group. ■

MENTAL HEALTH AND HALACHA WITH RABBI YONATAN ROSENSWEIG



In February, the Adlers hosted an evening when Rabbi Rosensweig discussed the fascinating work he undertakes in Israel and beyond, dealing with complex halachic issues related to mental health.

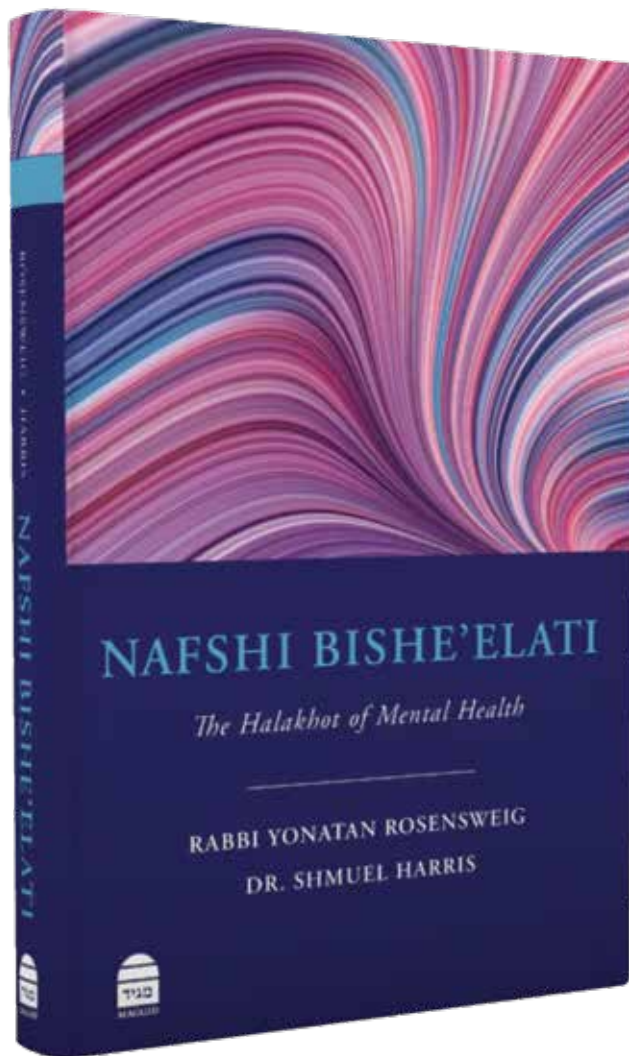
This is an abridged extract of his observations:-

I came to the UK not so much to give talks, but to have a few meetings in anticipation of hopefully doing things regarding mental health and the Jewish community here in the UK.

A bit about me: I'm 44 years old, married to Ilana, with five children, baruch Hashem, and we live in Bet Shemesh. I did eight years in Yeshiva in Maale Adoumin, then in 2006 I went to Melbourne, Australia for three years. I came back in 2009 and in 2010 I took a position as a community rabbi in Bet Shemesh, where I have been for the last 15 years. And since 2017-2018, I've been increasingly involved in mental health.

So what is mental health and halacha?

People always ask me how I got into this. It's really through community members asking shilas. As any rabbi usually does



when they're asked questions that they don't know the answer to, you try to look in the books to see what's around. And here was the first really shocking revelation: Almost nothing has been written on this topic of mental health. Most of these questions people asked were answered without any significant fundamental halachic framework. Accordingly when I came to study the topic I found an extreme lack of material.

I don't have any degree and I'm not a social worker, psychologist or a psychiatrist. I've spent two years learning about mental health within a halachic framework. Out of that study was born the idea to set up my nonprofit organisation, Maglei Nefesh, which I created about three years ago and which operates a busy helpline. Then, endorsed by many respected rabbanim I co-authored "Nafshi Bishe'elati," which recently came out in English and is focused on rabbinic training.

What are questions of halacha and mental health that are most frequently asked?

Some you can imagine, but there are some that you could never imagine. The

most classic question that I get is whether a person can use their phone on Shabbat. The phone is a central coping mechanism for anybody with depression, anxiety, OCD or BPD (borderline personality disorder). Such sufferers would need their phone, either to call a friend, relative or therapists on Shabbat when they need help, or when they're having a panic attack.

Others are soothed by music, so by far, the question that I get more than any other is: "Can I listen to music on Shabbat on my phone?" What they need is to get out of their head. The phone gives a way out – a distraction from harmful thoughts.

Another classic question relates to niddah women, who can't touch their husbands and are suffering from depression: "Can I get a hug from my husband if I'm having a depressive episode?"

I am also asked: "Do I need to respect a parent who is abusive physically, emotionally, sexually? What are the obligations that I have towards such a parent?"

I am asked by OCD patients about repeated washing or the need to hear repeated recitations of Megillot out of fear they might miss a single word. I reassure



I've spent two years learning about mental health within a halachic framework. Out of that study was born the idea to set up my nonprofit organisation, Maglei Nefesh, which I created about three years ago and which operates a busy helpline.



People are not craving leniencies. People crave good sense. If I told any of you that you could eat on Yom Kippur you would probably reply, “But do I really have to?”

them that they will hear every word.

One woman says she sees a Christian cross everywhere she looks. Even the shape of a window frame might trigger this thought: “Oh, now I’m thinking about Jesus.” And then they think that they’ve done something terrible, and that they have betrayed God, Judaism and themselves.

Eating disorders are another example of questions I get. There are many eating disorders, such as bulimia and anorexia. Does someone with anorexia need to fast on Yom Kippur or change their entire diet for Pesach? What if they have set meal times that they have to follow? If someone with an eating disorder has been hospitalized under threat of being force-fed, what are we supposed to do? And if being force-fed they ask, “Do I need to make a bracha on the food?”

Religious people have a religious identity which defines them. Look at Agam Berger when she was in captivity, and offered treif meat. If they had given her a phone, any rabbi would have told her she could eat whatever she needed to eat. But for a Jewish person, identity is important. So much so that they’re willing to die for it. If they didn’t care about their religiosity, they would do whatever they want to do. They wouldn’t be calling me.

So do such patients seek leniency? Not from my experience. People are not craving leniencies. People crave good sense. If I told any of you that you could eat on Yom Kippur you would probably reply, “But do I really have to?” Why? Because Yom Kippur defines who you are. If people are asking shilas, those are the ones who care. For them we need to find a balance .

On Yom Kippur when I talk to people with anorexia, I tell them not to fast, period. So, if a rabbi tells someone to eat a small amount only, that’s a bad psak. Anorexics should be eating regularly, according to their meal plan. There’s no middle way here. There’s no issue about balance. If I’m convinced that there’s pikuach nefesh involved, then I have to tell them to go all the way – just do not fast.

So what happens? Arguments. I spend hours on the phone, just to convince them that they’re not bad Jews. And it’s not their fault and that Hashem will not judge them negatively, because with mental health, the stigma is so significant and people blame themselves. They feel like they’ve failed somehow – failed themselves, God and Judaism. And that’s

not true; what we need to do is help them to understand. They’re not second-class citizens – they’re first-class citizens.

I got a call a few months ago about half an hour before Shabbos. A woman said, “I haven’t heard from my daughter for a day and a half. She lives in Jerusalem. My children tried to call her, I tried to call her. And she has a suicidal past. So, what do I do? Can I drive over there right now?” I said, “Get in the car and go. Don’t even hesitate.” After Shabbos I called her to find out what happened. And she said she was too late. She got there and her daughter was already dead.

So I asked myself, “What would happen if the story had ended differently? There could have been a million reasons why she wasn’t answering her phone. Should I have told her to drive?” The point is, we’re very good after the fact. We don’t ask those questions when it comes to physical health. We shouldn’t ask those questions either in cases of mental health issues. We have to understand what’s at stake, we shouldn’t take any chances.

So, if there’s only a 1% chance of risk to the person’s health, you’re not going to take the chance. That’s why halachicising mental health de-stigmatises it. Rabbis have a critical role in that.

Belief in God

Sometimes people ask, “Why did God do this to me? I’m suffering; I’m in distress; it’s not fair. Why should I believe in God?”

I tell them, “Stopping to believe is not going to solve your mental health problems. It might make you feel better but you will be dealing with the same issues tomorrow.” Some offer the platitude “It’s all for the best.” That’s good on a theoretical level. But I can tell you that as a rabbi, we’re dealing with practical questions and it’s not so simple. A lot of people can’t handle stuff. Sometimes it ends in suicides.

The real question is: What is God doing in your life? Everyone believes that everything that God does is for a reason and that God is always doing good things for us. They didn’t do anything wrong and somehow they’re paying for mistakes. The result of those two beliefs is very, very distressing to people with mental health problems.

I say to them, “The problem is not that God is in your life. The issue is the way God is in your life. Don’t expect that your relationship with Him will be the same as it is with everything else. It won’t be.” ■



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**CELEBRATING
OUR FIRST
TEN YEARS**

February 2025

אדר תשפ"ה

MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF RABBI

I am delighted to extend Divrei Beracha to the wonderful Magen Avot community on the exceptionally happy occasion of your 10th anniversary.

In Mizmor Shir Leyom HaShabbat (Psalm 92) there is an intriguing reference to "alei asor" – a ten-stringed instrument. The Zohar tells us that music is the language of the soul, and a ten-stringed instrument implies that at the time of redemption we will reach unparalleled musical heights which will enhance our spirituality in an extraordinary manner. We are currently only familiar with an octave of eight notes, but once the Mashiach comes, we will enjoy the unprecedented inspiration of a 'dectave' with ten notes. The number ten therefore represents the dizzy heights of spiritual accomplishment.

This is exactly what Magen Avot has achieved over the past momentous ten years, thanks to outstanding Rabbis and Rebbetzins, Chairmen, Executives, Boards of Management, numerous volunteers and everyone within the kehilla. Valerie and I are so delighted to be amongst many who benefit regularly from the moving tefillot and wonderful activities of this gem of a community.

I congratulate Simon Bentley and his great team for their leadership, and extend to Rabbi and Rebbetzen Golker my best wishes for continuous beracha vehatzlacha in their truly outstanding spiritual leadership of the community.

May you now go on mechayil el chayil in the future.



Chief Rabbi Sir Ephraim Mirvis KBE



A DECADE OF MAGEN AVOT: THE POWER OF TEN



Magen Avot

by Rabbi Yoni Golker

This publication marks a special milestone in the history of our kehillah. As we reflect on the past ten years, we recognise the remarkable growth of our community—one built on a shared vision and a steadfast commitment to Torah, mitzvot, and acts of kindness. Our ethos has been central to all we have achieved, shaping a vibrant and welcoming kehillah where each individual plays a vital role in its spirit and mission.

What truly differentiates Magen Avot, to me, is the extraordinary lay leadership—how each person is so dedicated to our kehillah's success and deeply invested in its future. As we celebrate ten years of Magen Avot, I find myself reflecting on the significance of the number *te* and how it is the minyan that truly defines our kehillah.

At the heart of our community is the power of *tefillah b'tzibur*—prayer with a minyan. A minyan is more than just ten individuals; it is a symbol of *achdus*, a coming together with strength, the collective voice of *Am Yisrael* calling out to Hashem as one.

The concept of a minyan finds a fascinating origin in the Torah's account of the spies sent to scout the Land of Israel (Bamidbar 13-14). When ten of the twelve spies returned with a negative report, spreading fear and despair among the people, Hashem refers to them as an *eidah* (assembly), from which Chazal

derive that a minyan consists of ten (Megillah 23b).

This association is striking: the first minyan in the Torah was one that spread negativity, yet we have transformed this concept into a force for holiness. A minyan also teaches us that every individual has strengths and weaknesses—merits and shortcomings—but when we stand together in prayer, Hashem sees us as a collective, focusing on our shared potential rather than our individual flaws. The Midrash (Tanchuma, Toldot 5) compares this to a bundle of reeds: alone, they are fragile, but together, they are unbreakable. So, too, when Jews unite, their strengths uplift one another, and their weaknesses are overshadowed by their collective merit. Within a minyan, we are judged not in isolation but as part of *Am Yisrael*, reinforcing the power of unity in both prayer and divine favour.

The concept of a minyan is deeply rooted in Torah. Avraham Avinu, in his plea to save Sodom, recognised the power of ten righteous individuals to influence the fate of an entire city. The Gemara teaches that whenever ten Jews gather to pray, the *Shechinah* is present. Chazal tell us that *tefillah b'tzibur* has an unparalleled ability to pierce the heavens, as the prayers of a congregation are always heard—even if the individuals within it may not be worthy on their own. The *Shulchan Aruch* emphasises the

importance of making every effort to pray with a minyan, reinforcing how central this mitzvah is to Jewish life.

Magen Avot has embodied this ideal over the past ten years. We have built a shul where *tefillah* is central and always uplifting, where Torah learning thrives, and where acts of *chesed* are abundant. Our minyanim have not just been gatherings for prayer, but moments of profound connection—between each other and *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. We have supported one another in times of joy and challenge, strengthening the bonds of kehillah and the power of *tefillah b'rabbim*.

Looking ahead, we reaffirm our commitment to *tefillah b'tzibur* as the cornerstone of our kehillah. Rambam writes that a person should always strive to pray with a minyan, for even if their *kavanah* is lacking, their *tefillot* will still be accepted through the strength of the congregation. We must continue to uphold this ideal, ensuring that Magen Avot remains a place where every voice in prayer strengthens the whole, where Torah and *kedusha* flourish, and where future generations inherit the same dedication to communal *avodat Hashem*.

May Hashem bless us with another decade of strength, inspiration, and connection. May our kehillah continue to flourish, and may our voices in prayer always be heard on High. ■

As we look forward to celebrating our 10th Anniversary. Our Emeritus Rabbi, Joel Kenigsberg has kindly provided this reflective article about the situation in Israel. Rabbi Kenigsberg now serves as Rabbi of Beit Knesset Hanassi in Rechavia, Jerusalem, as well as assistant director of the Manhigut Toranit program at Eretz Hemdah/ He is also on the editorial team of the English-language Tzurba m'Rabanan series.

LIVING THROUGH HISTORY: PERSPECTIVES FROM A NATION AT WAR

by Rabbi Joel Kenigsberg



In an essay in his Haggadah entitled: “Ben Zoma and the Sages,” Rabbi Lord Sacks, zt”l recounted the following story:

It happened at the beginning of the Gulf War in January 1991. I was in Israel with our family during the whole of the confrontation. In its early stages an Anglo-Jewish solidarity mission came to Israel, and I was asked to address the participants on the significance of the events through which we were living. We met on Friday night, on the Shabbat when we read the Torah portion of Beshalah (Ex. 13:17 onward), which begins with the departure of the Israelites from Egypt.

I quoted the Mishnaic and Talmudic passages about the argument between Ben Zoma and the sages, explaining that all agreed that the future redemption, when God would gather Jews “out of the land of the north and from all the countries where He has driven them” (Jer. 16:15) and bring them back to Israel, would be yet more remarkable than the Exodus from Egypt. How, I asked, could this be so? The biblical Exodus had been accompanied by signs

and wonders, miracles the like of which had long ceased. What could be more wondrous than those days?

I then quoted the opening verse of that week’s portion: “When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, which was near, for He said: “The people may change their minds when they see battle, and return to Egypt” (Ex. 13:17). The meaning of the verse was clear. Even though the Israelites were fleeing slavery, and though they had witnessed miracles, God was concerned that if they were to face war, they would turn around and go back.

I then said to the mission: You have just witnessed something more remarkable still. You will have noticed, on your arrival, that Ben Gurion Airport was almost empty [during the war, commercial flights ceased and all the airlines closed their desks; the airport was in direct danger of attack from Iraqi Scud missiles]. Only one service has continued to operate on a regular basis without interruption – the flights bringing Russian olim, ‘new immigrants,’ to Israel; perhaps the only

time in history that a country has been under missile attack and yet people have continued to travel there, seeking to make it their home. In the days of Moses, when the Israelites left Egypt, God feared that if they saw war they would return. Today the Russian Jews have seen war and still they continue to come. This week we have seen with our own eyes the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy that one day there will be an ingathering of exiles in some respects more miraculous than the Exodus from Egypt.

A Modern Exodus

Thirty-four years later, we are witnessing something remarkably similar. Once again, international airlines cancelled their flights. Israel was at war. And yet, nothing could stop the Jewish people from returning. Soldiers cut short vacations and returned from abroad to fight. Emergency flights were arranged, even on Shabbat, and with rabbinic approval. Volunteers flooded army bases, hospitals and border communities, and across the globe, Jewish communities rallied in unprecedented ways with fundraising, demonstrations, spiritual support and missions to Israel. Many Jews who had been distant from Israel or Judaism found themselves drawn back in ways they had never imagined.

Even under the most painful conditions, faith and resilience have shone through. Nowhere has this been clearer than in the stories of the returned hostages. Agam Berger, one of the IDF observation soldiers brutally abducted to Gaza, eventually returned with words that immediately resonated across the country: *"B'derech emunah bacharti u'b'derech emunah shviti"* – *"I chose the path of faith, and by the path of faith, I have returned."* Stories of the hostages' attempts to retain their faith and their identity in the most unimaginable conditions almost defy belief.

The past months have been filled with pain and loss. Yet, beneath the anxiety and grief, there has also been an unshakable sense of purpose. A nation drawn together, a people bound by a shared destiny.

Choosing Our Narrative

History is not just what happens; it is also the story we tell about it. And today, we are witnessing two competing narratives. One sees only tragedy – an unending

cycle of conflict, disunity and suffering. But the other tells a different story.

It tells of an army fighting not just with weapons, but with the knowledge that they are protecting homes, families, and a future. It tells of volunteers working tirelessly — packing food; providing shelter; offering support to soldiers, families of hostages, and evacuees. It tells of Jews around the world reconnecting to their people, their faith, and their land.

Which narrative will define this time?

The Strength of a Nation

In Parshat Beshalach, we see the same paradox. On the one hand, the Torah describes *Bnei Yisrael* as leaving Egypt *"b'yad rama"* – with confidence and strength. Yet just verses later, we see their fear. They cry out to Hashem. They question Moshe. They wonder if they should have ever left Egypt.

So which one is it? Were they strong or fearful? Resilient or hesitant?

The answer is: both.

The Ramban notes that the Torah uses two different terms to describe the people – *"Bnei Yisrael"* and *"Ha'am"* – the nation. Rav Eliyahu Schlesinger expands on this deliberate shift in terminology, explaining that there were two distinct groups amongst the nation. Some held firmly to their faith while others, paralysed by their fear, fell to despair. Some saw Yetziat Mitzrayim as a moment of crisis. Others saw it as the dawn of something miraculous. Perhaps the difference is hinted at in the very names used. Those who saw themselves as part of something greater, *Bnei Yisrael*, saw the miracles unfolding before them. Those who saw themselves as just another frightened nation, *Ha'am*, without any sense of their greater destiny, were overwhelmed by fear.

Our Moment in History

The story of living in Israel over the past year and a half has been the story of a people under attack, a nation facing trauma and ongoing crisis. But it has also been the story of a people who rediscovered their purpose, came together like never before, and renewed their sense of destiny.

This story is not yet complete. The next chapter is being written with each passing day, and each of us has a role to play in shaping it. As we stand in the midst of historic times, the choice before us is clear: Which narrative will define our reality? ■



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SAVE THE DATE

MAGEN AVOT 10TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS

A Weekend of Events for the Community 20-22 June 2025

To mark this landmark in our development we have put together a stunning weekend of events for all the community – and hopefully many visitors – to showcase our ethos.

The programme will start on Friday night 20th June 2025.

- Several eminent guest speakers have been lined up during Shabbat including:-
- Chief Rabbi Sir Ephraim Mirvis, Rabbi Joel Kenigsberg, Rabbi Yoni Golker, Gila Sacks and Phil Rosenberg President of the Board of Deputies

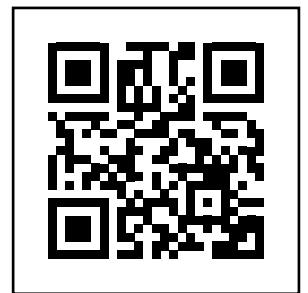
Sunday 22nd June 2025

- A Family Funday to be held at between 1pm-4pm.
- There will be a running BBQ Buffet lunch and a wide variety of entertainment for children and adults alike

Look out for updates on the various MA WhatsApp Groups.

Due to high expected demand please book early as numbers will be limited

Book here:
<https://bit.ly/4kMPkIO>



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GLORY IN THE AGGREGATE

by Natan Maurer

From where do you say that by the sea, a maidservant saw that which Isaiah and Ezekiel did not? As it says [in relation to them]: “and in the hands of prophets I will speak in parables” (Hosea 12:11) and “the heavens opened and I saw visions of God” (Ezekiel 1:1). What is this comparable to? To a human king that enters a province, and his guards surround him; strong men from his right and left, his soldiers before him and after him. And everyone was asking: “Who is the king?”, for he is flesh and blood like them. But when God was revealed by the sea, not one of them had to ask: “Who is this?” Rather, since they saw him, they recognised him, they all opened their mouths and said: “This is my God and I will praise him, this is my Lord of my father and I will exalt him.” (Exodus 15:1)
Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael, Shirah 3:10

Like this passage; it is also plainly insufficient, and we know this because the Torah tells us so. The Israelites “believe in God and in Moshe his servant” (Exodus 15:2). Yet we know that three days later, in the absence of water, the Israelites are complaining, and just a few verses after that, they are complaining again: “if only we had died in Egypt”, they claim in the absence of a slab of meat. How did it go so wrong so quickly?

What I have long suspected is not only that the experience at the sea failed to enrich the Israelites’ “God consciousness” long-term, it was in fact at odds with it. The massive inspiration of watching your enemies die is not sustainable. Eventually, the euphoria dies down, and you’re not Isaiah or Ezekiel – you’re a maidservant, you are hungry, you are scared. You’ve experienced something beyond the physical, but you are still physical. Yeshayahu Leibowitz develops this idea, drawing upon the passage in the Haggadah that attempts to count just how many plagues were inflicted on the Egyptians by the sea – culminating in Rabbi Akiva’s assertion of 250(!) plagues. In his interpretation, this entire passage is an ironic play on how, in the end, no number of plagues could fix what was

fundamentally broken with the Israelites.

What then is presented as the solution to their first complaint is instead the law – the classical rabbinic interpretation is that the three days without “water” mean three days without Torah, and when Moshe sweetens the water, the law is given, too: “There He placed for them decree and ordinance and there נסוהו” (Exodus 15:26) – a word that means “he tested them” literally, but also evokes נס – a miracle. This is what comes next for the Jewish people – the law, measurements and intricacies. As children we know that once the sea splits, the Torah gets less dramatic, more mundane, described by Yeshayahu Leibowitz as the movement from the world of poetry to the world of prose.

The Midrash in Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael, Vayassa 1:19 brings two opinions as to what laws were introduced at this stage. Rabbi Yehoshua maintains that it is Sabbath observance and honouring one’s parents. Rabbi Elazar Hamodai asserts that it is rules around forbidden relationships, as well as laws around payment of fines for various financial and physical crimes. If I may spin a little, to me each interpretation evokes a different aspect of the law. Rabbi Yehoshua reminds us of our relationship to God – two laws soon to be on the first side of the Luchos reflecting ways in which we integrate our understanding of God as our creator and our parent into the way we live our lives. Rabbi Elazar Hamodai is all about the second half of those Luchos – interpersonal relationships, the fabric of society.

What does this achieve? Rabbi Yehoshua goes on to interpret the word “נסוהו” a third way, suggesting that it also invokes “ניסאו” – “he elevated them to greatness.” Rabbi Elazar Hamodai challenges, arguing that the letter “ס” clearly indicates that God was testing them. I would submit there is no argument. The test brings us to greatness; they are one as God makes us partners in raising ourselves through that test.

Both rabbis’ opinions point at the same thing – in the gift of the law, God reminded us far more powerfully of the things the



splitting of the sea never could. The care of crossing on dry land is channelled into practices we can repeat every week and every day, to remind us that God’s care is best manifested when we ourselves show that care. The justice of the drowning of the enslaving army is reiterated when we know that we cannot get away with those same crimes, that justice doesn’t discriminate based on nationality.

As this issue indicates, Magen Avot turns 10 this year; I was 15 when the shul began, and I am 25 now. And I remember the launch as well as anyone – the excitement, the optimism, the over 300 attendees in the presence of the Chief Rabbi. And whilst that memory sustains, its fuel burns quick – it would have burnt us out much faster if it was all we had. A shul does not make it to 10 years by a vision alone, no matter how potent. A shul is built in small moments, repeated and iterated and examined and refined. Every care that honours God’s care, every fight for what’s right, in every person who attends and contributes another brick in the wall. This success is more challenging to recognise because it cannot be photographed, is not glamorous, is built from struggle and mundanity. And for that we should be grateful. Because this is the way Jews see God, His world, and our mission in it day by day. A little poetry, but mostly prose. Ours and His; glory in the aggregate. ■

Natan Maurer is a trainee solicitor at Slaughter and May. Otherwise, he moonlights as Magen Avot’s “number two Nach guy”.

FROM TABERNACLE TO TABLE: CELEBRATING INCLUSION AT MAGEN AVOT

by Emma Taylor-Levy

“Ethos” is defined by the Oxford dictionary as: “the characteristic spirit of a community as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations”. For 10 years now the Magen Avot ethos has attracted like-minded people and defines our shul’s identity.

This community’s ethos is set out on page 61 of this magazine. Throughout this and most previous editions of HaMagen we can see how our ethos has demonstrably informed our structure and decision-making processes.

While our community has already gone through periods of change and adaptation, including moving locations and having wonderful, new rabbinical families join us, we continue to evolve. Every week chabura and post-Mussaf speakers bring new ideas into our lives. However, our ethos remains the essential to guide our future commitments and projects.

The first of the statements of the Magen Avot explains that the shul is a **‘modern, Orthodox, inclusive community that is welcoming to all’**. This element of our shul is one of my favourite things about it.

I was fortunate to have my mother, Fiona, already attending Magen Avot when I started coming, so between her and Sophie I always had a ‘wingperson’. Despite my tendency to stand at the back or in a corner, nonetheless, I was pulled into a conversation every week. Looking back I can see that I was pulled into this loving and hospitable community willingly. Inclusion is important to me and I believe strongly in people being able to fit in as themselves.

During Pesach, we will read the story of the Four Sons who have joined the



Seder table. The wise son, the wicked son, the simple son and the son who does not know how to join the conversation. Each has different levels of understanding of our traditions and different approaches to life. A message I take from this is that everyone should be welcome to come to our table. While we all have different backgrounds, hold diverse perspectives and make unique life choices, it is this diversity that connects us. We can create a meaningful environment where we can learn more from one another and create a welcoming space for others to join.

I have spoken to three members of our community who represent interesting and diverse views – **Zachy Beider, Ruth Ehreich** and **Orna Hillman** – to ask them what inclusivity means to them in the context of our shul and their wider circles. Their reflections are a reminder of how far we’ve come as a community during the last 10 years and how much potential we have to keep moving forward.

How do you define inclusivity and what does it mean to you?

Zachy: To me, inclusivity is making everyone feel respected and welcome as part of a group. It means that each person has an equal opportunity and responsibility to contribute to something

Ruth: To me, inclusivity is about the shul being open to everyone. No matter a person’s Jewish knowledge or other aspects, like their age, it’s important for us to include them in our community when they come to our shul. Magen Avot runs many programmes to cater to a diverse crowd, with different points of interests. These include breakfast and talks on Simchat Torah for women in shul, Bnei Mitzvot programmes and Women’s Friday night programmes.

Orna: Inclusion is about welcoming everyone no matter their race, religion, gender, financial status, etc., and making sure everyone has equal opportunities. When I think more about how inclusion affects my personal life and community I think of how sometimes as Jews we are overprotective of our own spaces. We put ourselves in boxes e.g., Modern Orthodox, Charedi, Reform, religious, not religious, but we need to remember to be welcoming and avoid unnecessary divisions. We are one nation and we all want to be appreciated and accepted, and this goes hand in hand with us respecting and welcoming our differences as well as our similarities.

How did you feel welcomed into the shul?

Ruth: I was one of the first! Initially I felt slightly out of place,

being one of the few older members of the community, but I made friends regardless. I had experienced being excluded due to my age in the past so I can be a bit more sensitive about it, but it has never been an issue for me at Magen Avot. I made friends by talking to younger couples when I took the children's services and during kiddush everyone has always been very friendly. As the shul has expanded it has reached out to different types of people e.g., by starting children's services, more young couples started joining. I can now look around the shul and feel like I'm not the only one in my age bracket, which also helps me feel more welcomed.

Orna: I think it was the "whisky of the week" that initially drew me in! In contrast to my experience of other shuls, I found people more welcoming and I found myself coming every week. For the first time, I actually decided to become a member of a shul! I found that people were both friendly and non-judgemental, and I very quickly felt comfortable just being myself.

How do you welcome people into our shul?

Zachy: My friends and I try to welcome people into shul by including and involving them with the activities and conversations in Y@MA, but I think it is harder to welcome people into davening, which is why the community has so many communal events. My friends and I have also offered to host other friends for Shabbat so although they live further away, they can join us in shul.

Ruth: When we started the shul we had come from another that was very family orientated. I felt that we needed to make Magen Avot similar, to make our community feel like a family – which is why we have made certain decisions and chosen specific points for our ethos. One early conscious decision in the shul was to make sure we had excellent decorum during services, to respect those in leading positions and to make sure everyone could focus on their davening; we made kiddush the time for socialising.

I feel that I have been able to make new friends and welcome people during kiddush as there is a very friendly atmosphere. Whether you're in the queue for cholent and kugel or milling

around near the food, you can start a conversation with someone to build new relationships.

Orna: To be honest, I think I have some room for improvement on this one, but I have tried to follow the ethos of the shul and actively welcome new people I recognise from other places. I have also recommended MA to quite a few friends, and when they visit I try to make them feel comfortable here, introduce them to people and encourage them to come again.

How do you welcome people into your community (i.e., at work, at school, in friendship groups)?

Zachy: I try to involve them in the group and make them feel respected. This hopefully makes them more comfortable until they feel welcomed.

Ruth: I have always been a teacher, and so I have always had to think very carefully about kids' welfare. Welcoming children into class includes welcoming their parents. And whether or not their points of interest line up with mine, we have a shared priority and we can respect and be accepting of each other.

Orna: It became apparent during COVID that many people were completely isolated. Loneliness can be seriously detrimental to an individual's mental and physical health. When restrictions eased, I set up a 'Friday night club' where people aged 35 and above, who otherwise might have spent the evening alone, could enjoy Friday night with others in the same position. I created a WhatsApp group which currently has over 100 people on the list. We try to do a dinner every month or so in one of the group member's houses, and those who attend contribute financially towards the meal. We have also organised some weekday activities, such as a music night and treasure hunt. It has become a social group that I would like to think is welcoming, informal, and inclusive.

Was there a specific experience or event in your life that highlighted the need for more inclusivity in your community?

Zachy: I can't think of a shul event where I personally haven't felt unwelcomed and I really enjoy coming to Y@MA events. However, there are other experiences in my life that have

highlighted the need for more inclusivity. For example, in my school (Habs), many events are on Shabbat, which makes it harder for me to connect with my school community.

Ruth: I left a previous shul I attended because I felt my values didn't align with theirs. In that community, women weren't able to present a D'var Torah or speak in front of the congregation, which is particularly important to me and my family. I also felt that Bat Mitzvot weren't celebrated with the same significance as Bar Mitzvot. I believe that we should be celebrating people and their different life stages equally, regardless of sex.

Orna: In my opinion, singlehood does not make one any less able to contribute to the community. My sister o"n, in her short life, dedicated herself to charitable work, feeding the masses in soup kitchens, and taking care of and supporting people from all walks of life, emotionally and financially. She was appreciated and loved for doing exactly that.

My single friends have often voiced distress and frustration with their community's insensitivity towards them and have found it challenging that many in the Jewish community still expect everyone to marry and have children. Yet singlehood is increasingly common, and, as a religion, we rarely address the fact that the bias toward married people can feel judgemental. Singles are sometimes marginalised, made to feel like second-class citizens, irrelevant, and worse still, pitied. Members of our community should not only offer support for singles if needed but might also recognise that single people are often able to contribute the same as everyone else and sometimes more.

Conclusion

At Magen Avot there is a culture of welcoming all people. This reflects the policy of the United Synagogue and endorsed by the Chief Rabbi. So we invite others to join us for our shul services, participate in discussion groups or ask others to visit us for meals around our Shabbat tables. Our community events mirror the diversity in our community.

However, there is always room for improvement such that we should address unintended bias and negative judgements. Inclusivity isn't just a box to tick – it's a mindset that takes ongoing effort and reflection. ■

A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE ON FREEDOM



by Rebbetzen Dina Golker



Being an existential and counselling psychology student has made me think more deeply about the concept of freedom and now that Pesach is fast approaching, it is incumbent upon us all to reflect and understand this notion of 'cherus' – freedom – that this festival – known as 'z'man cheruseinu' – actually represents.

When initially introducing us to Pesach, the Torah commences with the powerful statement: 'This month shall be for you the head of months – it shall be the first of the months of the year for you' (Exodus 12:2)

The commentator R. Ovadiah Sforno is worried about the unnecessary duplication of phrases in this verse, and explains the meaning as follows: (Hashem is telling the Israelite nation): 'From now onwards, the months shall be your own, to do whatever you like with them, as contrasted with (your former) period of slavery when your time did not belong to you, but rather was (necessarily) devoted to the service of others and their wishes. Accordingly, 'it' (this month of Aviv/Nisan) shall be (regarded as) the first of the months of the year for you' – for it was then that your

truly free existence began'.

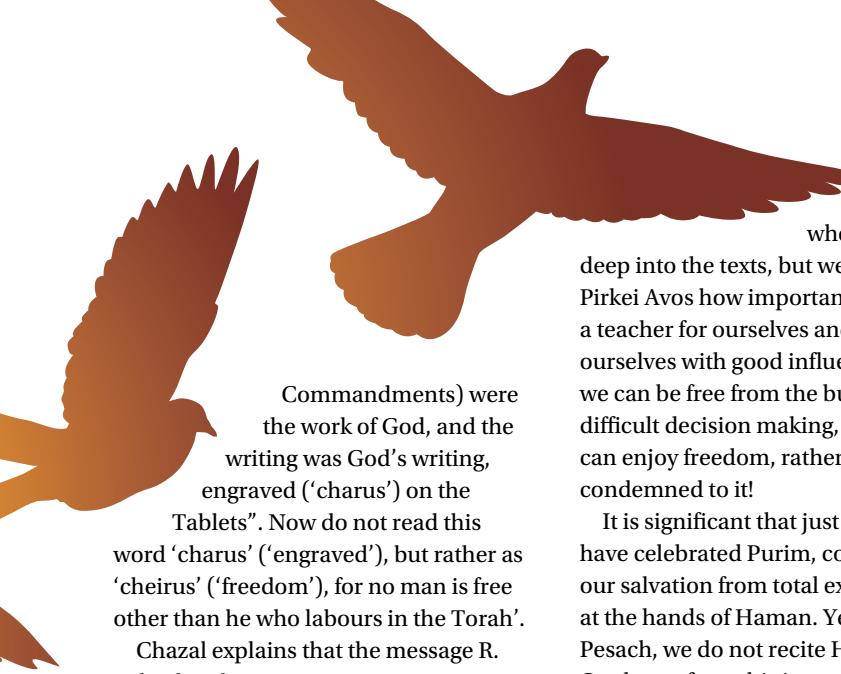
We may legitimately question, however, whether Sforno's analysis is really correct. For whilst it is true that on Pesach we were finally freed from the yoke of Egyptian slavery, we were now confronted with the burden of the compulsory observance of no fewer than 613 mitzvot – no mean task, and an obligation not demanded of any other nation!

In his book "Being and Nothingness," Jean-Paul Sartre, an existential philosopher, writes that 'Man is condemned to be free'. Life presents many challenges, and there is a lot of responsibility that comes with being Independent and free, but of course we all still strive for freedom.

In the Baraisa of R. Meir, otherwise known as 'Perek Kinyan HaTorah', (which we read on Shabbos afternoons during the summer months as a supplement to Pirkei Avos) R. Yehoshua b. Levi declares: 'Each day a Heavenly Voice issues from Mt. Horev, proclaiming: "Woe to (My) creatures for (their) contempt of the Torah, for whoever does not labour in the Torah is regarded as being under Divine censure... and (as) it says (Ex.32:16): "And the Tablets (containing the Ten

“

Jean-Paul Sartre, an existential philosopher, writes that 'Man is condemned to be free'. Life presents many challenges, and there is a lot of responsibility that comes with being Independent and free, but of course we all still strive for freedom.



Commandments) were the work of God, and the writing was God's writing, engraved ('charus') on the Tablets". Now do not read this word 'charus' ('engraved'), but rather as 'cheirus' ('freedom'), for no man is free other than he who labours in the Torah'.

Chazal explains that the message R. Yehoshua b. Levi is attempting to convey through the subtle device of the simple alteration of a single Hebrew vowel in the biblical text, is that there can essentially be no true freedom in the absence of a firm commitment to the laws of Hashem. In other words, the Tablets containing the Aseres HaDibros – the quintessence of the Torah – had freedom engraved upon them – liberty, not licence!

My personal analysis of Sartre's ideas is similar. Yes, freedom is difficult, but the Torah gives us that ability to choose well, to take the anxiety out of the choosing.

It's not always clear cut, even when we delve deep into the texts, but we are told in Pirkei Avos how important it is to appoint a teacher for ourselves and surround ourselves with good influences so that we can be free from the burden of very difficult decision making, so that we can enjoy freedom, rather than being condemned to it!

It is significant that just recently, we have celebrated Purim, commemorating our salvation from total extermination at the hands of Haman. Yet, unlike on Pesach, we do not recite Hallel on Purim. On the surface, this is puzzling. For, as the Gemara in Maseches Megillah points out, if we recite Hallel on Pesach, which celebrates our release from slavery to liberty, how much more should we do so on Purim, which commemorates our escape from death to life! But the Gemara goes on to explain: Whilst it is true that our lives were spared on Purim, we still remained slaves to Achashverosh – in other words, our time was still not our own. And this reflection brings us right back to the words of the Sforno.

Rousseau, a radical philosopher of the

Enlightenment and inspiration for the French Revolution, famously declared: 'Man was born to be free, but everywhere he is in chains!' As we know from history, that Revolution, which began so promisingly with the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and the slogan 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', ended in chaos, confusion, cruelty and mass slaughter. This happened because the Revolution's leading lights mistook liberty for licence ('hefkeirus').

As we celebrate 'Zman Cheruseinu', this Pesach carries special meaning with the return of Agam Berger and Naama Levy (our adopted hostages), two of the hostages cruelly taken on October 7th and now finally reunited with their families. Just as we recount the Exodus story, where Hashem redeemed Bnei Yisrael from the darkness of Mitzrayim into the light of freedom, we witness in our time a glimpse of that same redemption. Most poignantly Agam Berger found her ability to cope there in the religious routines she set for herself, in her keeping of Shabbos, and eating kosher and in the glimpses she saw of the hand of God. May Agam and Naama's return strengthen our 'emunah' and inspire us to work for a world where true freedom reigns for all. ■

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JEWISH CARE

MARKING THE 500TH NEWSLETTER CHABURA FOR PARASHAT VAYEISHEV

by Julian Maurer

Firstly, I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my son Natan Maurer, for his invaluable guidance and support in refining this Chabura. His patience in listening to countless drafts over the past few weeks has been truly inspiring. I am eternally grateful for his keen eye, insightful feedback, and unwavering belief that I could pull this off!

So, it's a real privilege to share this Chabura with you today. It's not often we get to celebrate two remarkable milestones in one go. On the one hand, we're diving into the gripping story of Yosef in Parashat Vayeishev — a narrative so full of drama and depth that it's captivated us for generations.

On the other hand, we are also celebrating an extraordinary achievement within our own community: the 500th edition of our synagogue newsletter. Yes, 500 weeks of collaboration, connection, and community spirit delivered straight to your inboxes, your ears, or wherever else you choose to engage with it!

The principles that I started with when designing and producing the weekly newsletter have stuck with me throughout this period. When we started the shul, we pulled together our ethos, which started as six statements (now seven with the inclusion of the support and advocating for the interests of those in need, including persecuted groups in the UK and abroad, consistent with Torah principles) and we have managed to stay true to that ethos in spite of people wanting to change our ethos or enhance too far outside of the lines.

When we started, the chief expressed his view on our first meeting — over 10 years ago — to create an ethos and stick strongly to that ethos. He said: "Don't allow people to come along and change the vision and the personality of the shul — stay tethered to your original ethos."

Well, the same was true for the

newsletter. I had a strong sense of what we were creating and I feel it holds up to its guiding principles all these years later. But to get us here has been a personal journey for me — one of which we can, I hope, correlate when talking about this week's sedra.

Both Yosef's story and our newsletter have taught me important lessons about perseverance, leadership, and growth. Today, I want to explore how Yosef's journey from an immature dreamer to a wise and selfless leader parallels the evolution of our newsletter.

Along the way, I'll reflect on how this experience has shaped my understanding of servant leadership — whether in my role here as editor or in my professional life working as an IT consultant for companies such as AstraZeneca and GSK.

When I think of Yosef, I can't help but imagine him strutting around in his famous k'tonet pasim (כְּתוּנֵת פָּסִים) — that multicoloured coat so vividly described in the Torah. Although I have to amend that line since I attended Rebbetzen Ilana Epstein's fantastic breakfast talk a few weeks ago where it's described more like a "striped garment". But let's be honest: for those of us who grew up on "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat", it's Andrew Lloyd Webber's music and Tim Rice's lyrics that often come to mind: "I look handsome, I look smart, I am a walking work of art!"

That iconic image of Yosef is both captivating and misleading. His coat, after all, is much more than a fashion statement. It's a symbol of favouritism, of division, and ultimately of the struggles Yosef must overcome.

Yosef's father, Yaakov, made no secret of his special love for Yosef, born to his beloved wife Rochel. The k'tonet pasim was a visual declaration of this favouritism.

For his brothers, the coat became a daily



reminder of their father's unequal love, sowing seeds of jealousy and resentment.

Let's set the stage — literally! Imagine being one of Yosef's brothers. Every time Yosef struts by in that flashy coat, you can just feel the brothers rolling their eyes. Not only does Yosef have this magnificent coat, but he starts having these dreams, which — let's be honest — don't exactly win him any brother-of-the-year awards.

Yosef has big dreams — literally. First, he dreams that his brothers' sheaves of wheat are bowing down to him. And what does he do? He decides to share this dream at the breakfast table. "So, guys," Yosef says, "I had this dream last night where you were all bowing down to me." You can just imagine the brothers' faces. As if the coat wasn't bad enough! Then he has another dream where the sun, moon, and stars are also bowing to him. And again, Yosef feels the need to share it with everyone — because why not? What could possibly go wrong?

What Yosef doesn't yet realise is that his dreams, while significant, are not about him alone. They're about a greater purpose — a purpose he won't understand until much later. And Yosef, being young and perhaps a little full of himself, doesn't make

things easy. He has dreams — bold, dramatic dreams in which he rises above his brothers.

And we know what happens next. Yosef's brothers seize him, strip him of his coat, and throw him into a pit. Here, Yosef faces his first real moment of humility. Stripped of the garment that symbolised his status, Yosef begins to experience the vulnerability that will shape his character. He is sold into slavery and carried off to Egypt, where his life takes a series of dramatic turns.

In Potiphar's house, Yosef begins to grow. Despite his misfortunes, he works hard and rises to a position of trust and responsibility. But elements of his youthful pride remain. When Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him, Yosef acts righteously by refusing her advances — but his reasoning reveals a lingering self-focus. "How can I sin against Hashem and against Potiphar?" he says, framing his decision in terms of his own moral standing rather than a broader sense of humility or concern for others.

It's only in prison, falsely accused and abandoned, that Yosef's transformation truly begins. Stripped of status, wealth, and freedom, Yosef has no choice but to turn outward. When Pharaoh's servants share their troubled dreams, Yosef listens. He doesn't boast about his interpretive skills; he simply says, "Interpretations belong to Hashem."

This shift in focus — from self to service — marks a turning point in Yosef's life. By the time he is summoned to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, Yosef is ready. He listens, interprets, and goes further — offering a strategic plan to save Egypt from famine. Yosef is no longer the arrogant dreamer; he is a wise and humble servant-leader.

The role of a leader, whether it's Yosef guiding Egypt through a famine or an editor shaping a weekly newsletter, is to serve others. It's about putting the needs of the community ahead of personal ambition. This principle of servant leadership is a cornerstone of both Jewish tradition and contemporary society.

When Yosef is finally reunited with his brothers, he reveals the depth of his transformation. He doesn't seek revenge or dwell on past hurts. Instead, he sees his journey as part of a divine plan.

וַעֲתָהּ לֹא אָרַתְּם שְׂלֹחֶתֶם אֹתִי הֲנֵה בְּיָ הַאֱלֹהִים

"And now, it was — not you — who sent me here — but Hashem," Yosef says, showing a level of humility and perspective that would have been unthinkable in his younger years.



Like Yosef's story, the journey of our newsletter has been one of growth, perseverance, and transformation. When the first edition was launched, it was a modest endeavour, guided by a clear vision. My son Raffi Maurer played a key role in shaping its distinctive look, with the Israel blue colouring and the iconic clocks that have become its hallmarks.

But just as Yosef faced challenges, so too has our newsletter. There have been technical glitches, tight deadlines, and the occasional struggle to find contributors. Yet, week after week, the newsletter has persevered, adapting to meet the needs of our community.

One of the most rewarding aspects of editing the newsletter has been witnessing the incredible talent and dedication of our contributors. Whether it's a thought-provoking event report, an eye-catching poster, or a carefully proofread announcement, each contribution reflects the best of our community.

As editor, I see my role as a facilitator — a bit like Yosef in Pharaoh's court. Yosef took disparate elements (dreams, symbols, and economic realities) and wove them into a cohesive plan. Similarly, I work to bring together posters, dates, and announcements into a single, clear narrative that serves our community.

This process has taught me the importance of servant leadership: stepping back, empowering others, and ensuring the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

As we celebrate the 500th edition of our newsletter, it's worth reflecting on the lessons we can draw from Yosef's story and

from the newsletter's journey:

The first is perseverance: Yosef's life was full of setbacks, but he never gave up on his dreams. Similarly, our newsletter has persisted through thick and thin, serving as a constant in our shul's life.

The second is vision: Just as Yosef's dreams were visions of a future shaped by faith and resilience, the newsletter is a vision of our community — its values, aspirations, and goals.

The third is connection: Yosef interpreted dreams to connect with others, building bridges even in the most difficult of circumstances. Our newsletter plays a similar role, keeping us informed and united.

The fourth is commitment: As Pirkei Avot teaches:

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶן חוֹרֵין לְבִטּוּל מְמֻנָה

"It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you free to neglect it" (This line appears in Pirkei Avot, Perek Sheini (Chapter 2), Mishnah Chaf-Alef (Mishnah 21). It is attributed to Rabbi Tarfon, who teaches about the balance between effort and responsibility in fulfilling one's duties). This timeless wisdom from Pirkei Avot reminds us of the importance of contributing to the ongoing work of our community. Each edition of the newsletter is a work in progress, an ongoing commitment to building our community.

As we mark this milestone, let's take a moment to appreciate the resilience, creativity, and dedication that have brought us here.

Like Yosef, who rose from the depths of the pit to become a leader in Egypt, our newsletter has grown from humble beginnings to become an indispensable part of our community.

Yosef's journey exemplifies the transformative power of leadership. From a young, impulsive dreamer, he evolves into a wise and compassionate ruler. His ability to interpret dreams and provide strategic solutions to complex problems highlights the importance of foresight and innovation.

Similarly, our newsletter has served as a platform for community leadership. It has provided a space for sharing ideas, fostering dialogue, and inspiring action. By keeping our community informed and connected, we have strengthened our collective identity and our ability to address challenges together.

Just as Yosef rose from the depths of the pit to become a leader in Egypt, our newsletter has risen from humble

beginnings to become a vital part of our community's life — even expanding to provide an audio version for those with vision impediments or those on the move and whose time is short. The newsletter is also converted into a more readable edition in the body of each accompanying email and also provided to our gabbaim for the weekly or Yom Tov announcements.

Think of each edition like one of Yosef's dreams — it's a snapshot of where we are, what we care about, and where we're going. It's a dream that keeps unfolding week after week, issue after issue.

And sometimes, just like Yosef's story, we don't always see the immediate impact of these small efforts. But over time, just as Yosef's dreams culminated in saving his family and a nation, our newsletter serves as a cornerstone of community cohesion, helping us celebrate milestones, promote events, and support one another.

The written word has the power to transcend time and space. It can inspire, educate, and unite people across generations. Our newsletter, as a written document, has played a significant role in preserving our heritage and fostering a sense of continuity.

By documenting our community's events, achievements, and challenges, we

create a valuable historical record. This record not only informs future generations but also strengthens our own sense of identity and purpose.

There's a famous line from the Joseph musical that sums up Yosef's attitude perfectly: "Any dream will do." It reminds us that even the simplest dreams have value, and even the smallest acts of community engagement — like reading and contributing to a weekly newsletter — can lead to something much bigger.

In the spirit of Yosef, let's keep dreaming, keep striving, and keep contributing to this wonderful community of ours. And who knows? Maybe in another 500 editions, we'll look back and realise just how far we've come — just like Yosef did when he finally reunited with his brothers. We see Yosef's profound spiritual growth and his ability to forgive. He recognizes that his journey, though filled with trials and tribulations, is ultimately part of a divine plan. This understanding allows him to forgive his brothers and embrace his role as a leader with compassion and wisdom.

So, let's raise our virtual (or literal!) glasses and toast to the next 500 editions. Here's to more dreams, more connection, and maybe even more Joseph musical references!

And with that, I'll leave you with the closing lines of the musical itself: "Go, go, go Joseph, you'll make it someday, hang on now Joseph, you'll make it anyway!"

Let's take that same optimism and joy into our celebration today.

Before I end today, can I just take this opportunity to thank the shul founders, executive and council for allowing me the opportunity to serve the community over these last 10 years. I do it not for thanks — there is no editor Julian Maurer acknowledgement at the bottom of each newsletter — but I instead do it because there is a need and I want to serve this wonderful community — putting my skill set to good use! A quick thanks also to our proofreaders and contributors who work to pull the data together and provide the all-important corrections, sometimes with only moments to spare each week!

Finally, can I thank my wife, Esther, who has allowed me the space and freedom to work tirelessly late into the night to pull together the weekly newsletters sometimes going through four or five drafts each week! Your patience is appreciated, and you share in this tremendous milestone also.

Shabbat Shalom, and here's to many more newsletters! ■

This year, 1 in 4 people at the Seder table will be living with mental illness or distress.

As we gather together at Pesach, over a quarter of our community – thousands of Jewish people of all ages – will be struggling with their mental health.*

By supporting Jami you will enable us to provide vital mental health services to those in the community who need it most. Thank you.

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*26% of respondents to the 2023 JPR Research Panel reported personally experiencing some degree of mental distress, including mental illness or trauma, currently or within the last three months.

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PESACH IN 1945

by Laurie Maurer

The year 2025 marks 80 years since the end of World War II and the Holocaust — the systematic murder of six million Jews.

For some, it marked their last Seder in captivity. Rafael Grosz, a survivor of Bergen Belsen, describes his Pesach in the camp (transcribed roughly from testimony on the USC Shoah Foundation website):

About two weeks before Pesach, they bombed the camp and the food storage area. So [the guards] couldn't give us food and we couldn't bury the dead. At that time, they brought in transports from all around Germany, filling the barracks. There was lots of screaming.

Before Pesach, the kosher committee went to the Germans to ask them to give us flour and potatoes. They decided that the week of Pesach they would give each person two kilos of potatoes and half a kilo of flour so they could bake matzah. How did we make matzah? By the time it was announced that there were potatoes and matzah for Pesach, everyone decided they wanted to be kosher! But the general command said only the 300 on the list would receive the allocated food. Of course we shared with everybody.

The day before, the Germans allocated a soldier to march us out of the camp into the nearby forest to gather wood for baking matzah. As we were marching, we saw the enormity of the crimes committed there. There were people between the barracks piled up like mountains. The crematoria were bombed, I am guessing I saw maybe 10,000 people. As I walked, I thought to myself, "These people are fathers, brothers, husbands. Who murdered them?" They were literally clubbed to death rather than shot.

The officer told us, "Make sure you're not cutting any green trees, only to pick up dry wood." I said to myself, "Look how concerned he is about a piece of wood, and here there are thousands of people he is not concerned about at all."

The next day we made the pile of wood and placed a metal grate on top to place the matzah on. They turned brooms in the

washrooms into rolling pins, rolled and baked the matzah and had enough for six matzot a person.

I can't say for certain whether the Pesach of 1944 was any different, but something tells me young Rafael Grosz felt a redemption coming; despite being in captivity, he held onto the freedom of being able to make matzah and share it with his fellow campmates.

Pesach 1945 was very different for other survivors – liberated survivors. Lola Lieber talked about her Seder that year with the Bobover Rebbe:

It was March 28, 1945, a Wednesday; in the Hebrew calendar it was 14 Nissan 5705.

This was the most unforgettable Seder of my life, unsurpassed until today. When we began to recite the Haggadah, we all wept. We did not need to add extra discussion linking us to the Israelites' departure from Egypt and the miracles they experienced. We were a remnant, a mere fragment of a vibrant and huge population of Jews. We represented all that was lost as much as we represented the reality of survival. We were not telling the story of the ancient deliverance that night, but were living the contemporary recital of our own survival and the continuation of our people.

It was a Seder of joy and tears. The wine we spilled from the glasses to signify the 10 Plagues could also represent the losses we had only recently suffered. The Bobover Rebbe did not know what had happened to his family any more than I knew about mine, yet we both knew. His face and mine were mirror images of one another. Our nightmares and fears were as yet not specific in detail, but were nonetheless present in our hearts that night.

Eighty years on, history seems to be repeating itself. I only need to look at our own Seder table last year, where Eli Sharabi's photo sat in the centre. He was not, however, sitting at a table amongst family and friends, as we were. He was languishing underground in tunnels, starved and brutally beaten physically and spiritually. This year, 2025, Eli is back home in Israel, albeit a shadow of his former self and with the knowledge that his family was wiped out. Similarly,



our very own adopted hostage, Agam Berger, was said to have observed Pesach in captivity by avoiding leavened bread. This year she will be fulfilling the positive mitzvot of matzah and maror as well.

Whether it was Nazi Germany or Hamas terrorists, our people have come out of captivity, still with their heads held high. But we know that this nightmare is not over. This year our brothers and sisters may spend their second Pesach in Gaza, chained, bound, and without sufficient food, drink or medical care.

What is the difference then, between 1945 and 2025? The difference of course, is we have a Jewish state – Israel, our ancestral homeland. We have men and women who give their blood, sweat and tears to defend their fellow Jews and all citizens of Israel. Diaspora Jews have a place to go to.

Last year, Eli Sharabi's photo sat on a chair at our Seder table while he languished in Gaza. This year he will be reunited with family and friends, and I hope all the remaining hostages will sit with theirs. I hope that this year, Eli's chair at our table will be filled instead by Eliyahu HaNavi. ■

Laurie Maurer works as a projects executive in the United Synagogue's education and events department, which organises educational material and events for the 56 US communities and beyond. She is on the editorial team of the weekly Torah publication Daf Hashavua and has frequently contributed to the Jewish News and Jewish Chronicle.

FROM KRETINGA TO SUNDERLAND: EXCERPTS FROM MY GRANDFATHER'S MEMOIRS

by Leila Behrman

My maternal grandfather, Isaac Cohen, was born in 1877 in Lithuania in a small shtetl called Kretinga (previously Krottingen). The Jewish population was about 300 families.

Kretinga is unique because here the local Jewish community had lived apart from the local Christian community in a separate section of the town called Jewish New Town in the valley of the Akmena river.

The first knowledge about the Jews settling in Kretinga emerged from the end of the 18th century, and the Jewish New Town even had a separate market, located near the road that leads to Klaipėda coastal town. Although Jews traditionally engaged in various crafts and commerce, here Jews also traded in a specific and unusual local product – amber.

Although my grandfather lived in London when I was a child, he stayed with us every August in Sunderland, and I remember him spending many hours writing his memoirs on an old portable typewriter. By the end, it comprised almost 400 pages.

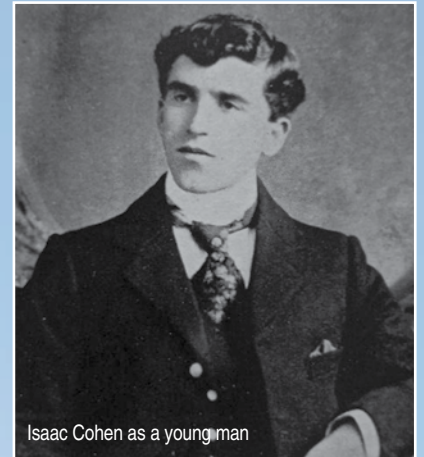
On the second day of Shavuot in 1989, I read how, as a 12-year-old boy, he had been walking through the town exactly 100 years earlier on the second day of Shavuot in 1889, and had noticed flames

shooting through the straw roof of one of the houses. Most of the houses in the town were wooden with thatched roofs, and it wasn't long before the flames had spread and engulfed the surrounding homes. He ran to his house, and apart from some bedding which he managed to drag outside, the house and all their possessions were destroyed. He records:

A disastrous fire razed the whole town to the ground. Only two or three houses in the outskirts of the town escaped complete destruction, and these houses served the purpose of providing shelter for the night to a number of people who were left homeless.

Luckily, no one was injured in the fire, and one positive outcome was that this catastrophe accelerated the emigration of the towns folk thereby avoiding the worsening climate of anti-Semitism and dreadful living conditions. As was the case with many families, his father and two elder siblings had already left for Sunderland a year earlier in order to set up home and look for some method of earning a living.

One can well imagine the impoverished condition the vast majority of the Krottingen Jews found themselves in after their homes and practically all their



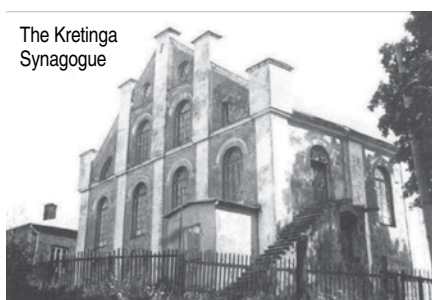
Isaac Cohen as a young man

belongings were entirely destroyed. The Jews' general economic circumstances, never having been in a flourishing condition, had for certain reasons gradually deteriorated from about the middle of the 1880s. This resulted in lowering their standard of living and in an interminable struggle by the breadwinners to provide the bare minimum necessary for the subsistence of their families.

An appeal was set up by the Sunderland community's minister, Rev. A.A. Green, who then travelled to Krottingen to distribute the funds collected and to assess the situation. He later wrote to the editor of the JC:



Cemetery entrance



The Kretinga Synagogue

The distress and destitution had in no way been exaggerated; the ruin is complete. It was impossible for me to distinguish where the streets had once been, charred timbers and a few walls here and there, alone marked where the streets had once been ... The men were content to sleep in the open air if they could procure temporary shelter for their wives and children.

Within two or three weeks my grandfather had begun his week-long journey with his stepmother and four siblings by cargo boat and fourth-class rail. Most of these emigrants headed for Sunderland. Some Krottingers had already moved there and set up home before bringing over their families. Most were living in abject poverty:

Generally speaking the economic condition only began to improve when their children reached their early or middle teenage years after their boys had left school. Practically all of them immediately commenced work (peddling) and handed over their earnings to their parents, which were of rather small amounts in the beginning.

Arrival in Sunderland was not a pleasant experience – in fact quite a shock.

I naturally felt rather disappointed upon realising that it fell far short of the rose coloured mental picture I had drawn about the kind of life people enjoy in England. This was based on the

glowing accounts which were sent by our landsmen who preceded us, and who had already been established in Sunderland. They particularly laid stress upon the high standard of living most of the people enjoyed there, as compared with that “in der heim.”

Unfortunately, there was a particularly unpleasant thing I had to put up with, that of being molested by the “goyeshe” lads of the neighbourhood. These urchins seemingly considered me both a foreigner and a Jew ... a fit subject for their sport. They weren't, though, satisfied with flinging insulting epithets at me, but I was often subjected to physical assaults by them. Occasionally I appeased these ragamuffins by complying with their demands of “say your prayers,” and I would administer to them a few “blessings” in Yiddish which satisfied them and at which they seemed to be immensely amused.

The salary my father received from the small number of landsmen and a few other newly arrived immigrants in Sunderland for the services he rendered, such as conducting a daily shiur, teaching the boys Hebrew and generally acting as their spiritual guide, was hardly commensurate with the time he devoted to it. This was certainly insufficient to provide even a very modest living for our family. My two elder brothers therefore had to contribute the best part of their meagre earnings towards the household expenses.

Emigrants took whatever occupation one could find, usually peddling from door to door. One brother was trading gilt-edged picture frames, some with pictures of New Testament scenes.

It was rather a quaint sight to see these travellers, some with beards, walking through the streets with pictures of Mary

and Jesus, suspended with string and dangling from their shoulders! They appeared to be quite oblivious of the jocular remarks made by the passers by.

Although his father was a very learned man, his economic position was “none too bright,” and to augment his meagre earnings, he conceived the idea of starting a business making home-brewed beer, the manufacture of which he had some knowledge gained from a relative who had been engaged in that occupation in Lithuania. He invested in the necessary equipment and the raw materials and put his plan into effect.

Apart from the actual brewing of the beer, expertly carried out by my father, the manifold duties of handling the concern fell to me. I did the buying in of the yeast and hops, canvassed for orders, filled and washed the bottles, delivered orders and collected the empties. As the business was mainly conducted on a credit basis, I was also responsible for keeping the accounts.

One of the difficulties I experienced was the question of transport, since I had to deliver the beer by hand, in a basket. I also had to contend with the attention of the urchins in the street, who took an inordinate and curious interest in them. They often adopted a belligerent attitude towards me, in spite of the common interest I shared with them – that of dodging the school-board man who was constantly on our track.

Education at that time was compulsory up to the age of 14, and my grandfather was only 12. After a couple of months of successful trading, selling the beer for 1 penny a bottle, his father decided to experiment with enhancing the flavour by adding certain spices and thereby establish himself more firmly in the business. Sadly, this backfired, and many customers withdrew their patronage, some even accusing him of trying to poison them!

This blow to our prestige, together with the resultant financial loss, discouraged father to such an extent that he decided to put an end to this business. We thereupon disposed of our entire equipment ... lock, stock and barrel ... to a rag and bone merchant who came on his daily rounds with his barrow in our street.

My grandfather's next excursion into the world of business followed when he purchased a stock of haberdashery.

It was only some years later that I visualised this rather grotesque scene: of a long-bearded and patriarchal-looking Jew, dressed in a frock coat and silk hat, entering the large department store called Liverpool House with a diminutive twelve

and a half year old boy, and naively asking in highly imperfect English, to be shown some pins, needles, shirt buttons, etc. He also at the same time tried to explain to the assistant that I, his son, was the one he required these articles for, and that he wanted to buy them wholesale, saying that I was starting in business. He also enquired whether they could supply us with a basket to carry the goods in.

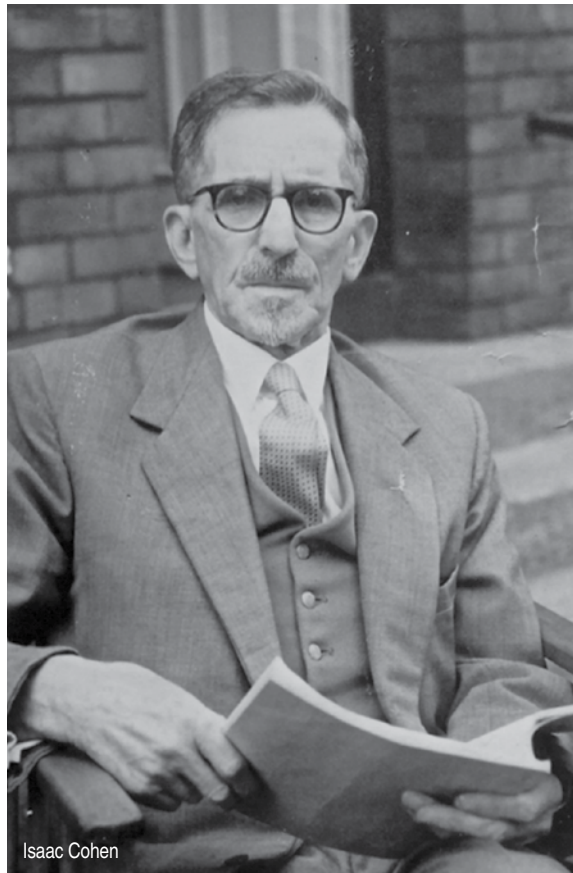
Thus began my grandfather's career in "klappen," travelling from door to door selling some basic haberdashery items and gradually building up his stock to include aprons, scarves and children's ware. He found this new occupation extremely distasteful, often having the door slammed in his face, and making him feel like a common beggar.

After six months on the road, my grandfather turned 13. The preparations for his Bar Mitzvah were carried out on a modest scale and with little publicity. The only intimation given to the public was on the Shabbat morning before the reading of the Torah when his father sent a message to the Parnes, through the shames, with a request to honour him with an aliyah. After the president consulted the gabai, the former indicated to his father that the request would be granted. After the service, a small kiddush was held at home for family and close friends.

The Bar Mitzvah was on Shabbat Shuva so he was exempt from leining and the reciting of maftir and haftarah, which was the prerogative of the reverend or minister.

The first Bar Mitzvah gift he received was from an uncle ... a pair of comfortable boots, far superior to those he was accustomed to wear. His father presented him with a complete suit of clothes, including a waistcoat and a bowler hat, and another uncle gave him a collar and tie. The fourth and final gift was a piece of jewellery in the form of a scarf pin - all of which he wore with great pride. He was determined to wear his new outfit whilst working rather than his usual "shmattees."

Whilst out on business, about a couple of miles from home, I was surrounded by a gang of urchins, who made a most determined attempt to investigate the contents of my basket, which of course, I strongly resisted. But whilst trying my hardest to protect my merchandise from being pilfered, these ruffians snatched the bowler hat from my head, and proceeded



Isaac Cohen

to dismember it with a pocket knife. After completing this act of vandalism, they flung the rim of my hat at me and ran off with its crown, which they used as a football.

The most upsetting aspect of this attack was that my grandfather was left in the street bareheaded, a condition which he had never experienced previously.

During this time, the school-board man was a constant threat. Whenever he saw grandfather in the street, he threatened him with severe penalties unless he would begin to attend school. Some months after his Bar Mitzvah though, he was caught in the act by a plain-clothed policeman, and by coincidence, his elder brother was apprehended on the same day for hawking without a pedlar's license. The two brothers were called up at a magistrates' court but were let off with a warning, though as far as I know, my grandfather never attended school in Sunderland. He continued with klappen, taking every precaution against the risk of being intercepted again by having transferred his business activities to the remotest part of the town, some two miles away from the usual rounds. On reaching the age of 14, grandfather gave up the sale of haberdashery and embarked on a much more advanced vocation for the next five years or so, that of "packman," meaning that he became a real traveller, a dealer in drapery and clothing carrying his wares on his back rather than a basket over his arm.

It was then a firmly held idea by all the immigrants in Sunderland that travelling was the only avenue open to them to establish themselves in a stable economic position. It had therefore never occurred to anyone to try and find some other means to earn a livelihood other than that of peddling. Consequently, their sons followed the same occupation on leaving school. Whilst the klappen were paid in cash, those packmen who had their regular rounds could sell on credit, with their customers paying off in instalments.

Although this work was distasteful to my grandfather, he continued until such a time when his father had been set up with a small business of his own by his two elder sons as a wholesale draper, and was able to dispense with grandfather's services.

When looking back to my travelling days, I am reminded of some of the problems I had to deal with due to the mercurial fluctuation of my age, which was oscillating between 12 and 17 years, a gap that I had difficulty bridging. Twelve was the age limit for rail travel at half fare, whilst 17 had to be reached before one could have a pedlar's licence granted.

Hawking, a trade which was carried on by a very low type of people, was looked upon with great suspicion by the police authorities. The question of securing a pedlar's license, however, had serious implications and in the absence of this legal document when out hawking, he found himself in the cells of several police stations in the course of these "illicit activities." Although my grandfather had no secular schooling, he was very interested in world affairs and the arts and ensured that his four daughters received the education he had missed. One attended art school, another studied ballet, opening her own ballet school, whilst a third became a well-known violin teacher who wrote a series of violin books which are still in use. He was an active Zionist, attended an early Zionist conference in Switzerland and celebrated the entry into Jerusalem in 1918 by Field Marshal Lord Allenby by hanging a large Zionist flag out of the window, causing much curiosity amongst his neighbours.

My grandfather lived to the age of 90. How proud he would have been to know that two of his grandchildren and 23 of his great-grandchildren now have their homes in Israel with several having served or currently serving with the IDF. ■

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SURVIVAL AND RENEWAL WHY OUR SECOND SEFER TORAH IS SO HEAVY

by Josh Abeles

To anyone who has ever held our “second” Sefer Torah, and especially our Hagba experts, this news won’t come as a surprise. It’s heavy. I mean really heavy.

The moment you lift it up or are handed it over you feel its weight – the physical elements of the parchment and the wood. However, what you may not realise is the weight of history it carries.

In 1942, the Jewish Museum of Prague listed around 760 Jewish artefacts and memorabilia. But as the Nazis swept through Central and Eastern Europe, looting synagogues and Jewish institutions, they seized control of the museum, transferred in their loot, and grew the collection to over 140,000 objects. Many believe the Nazis intended to establish a museum of an “extinct race” – a chilling vision in which Judaica would serve as relics of a people they had erased.

As the war ended, Jewish communities across Europe had been decimated, yet the spirit of renewal emerged. Slowly, survivors and refugees began rebuilding, and Torah scrolls, once taken from thriving congregations, found their way back into Jewish hands.

Central Jewish Museum in Prague had accumulated over 100,000 artefacts including around 1,800 Torah scrolls, such



as those pictured here. Museum staff in Prague worked tirelessly to catalogue the scrolls, ensuring as much provenance as possible was saved for each scroll. All the curators at the museum were eventually transported to Terezin (Theresienstadt) and Auschwitz, and only two survived. The Jewish community continued to hope that one day these treasures would be returned to their original homes.

After the war, some of the artefacts were given to congregations who re-established themselves in Czechoslovakia, although they were not always original items from their own communities. However, Jewish practice was once again suppressed when

the Communists came to power in 1948, and most synagogues were closed. In order to keep the items safe once more, London Jews purchased 1,564 scrolls from the Communist government and took them back into Jewish hands at Westminster Synagogue. The Memorial Scrolls Trust of Westminster Synagogue has since cared for and sent the scrolls to synagogues and organisations across the world.

Some made their way to Arizona in the USA.

A sofer known as Rabbi Alter, working in the London Beit Din after the war, received numerous Sifrei Torah from Prague’s overflowing Jewish Museum.

David Djanogly, born in London in 1938, was the son of Aaron Djanogly, a Sephardi Jew, whose own life had been marked by upheaval. Aaron had lived under three empires – born in Tbilisi, Georgia, escaping the Russian Revolution, passing through Ottoman Turkey, and finally settled in England in the mid-1920s. Despite his deep Jewish identity, Aaron didn’t consider himself a learned man, so when David’s Bar Mitzvah approached in 1951, he sought guidance in selecting a meaningful gift.

He turned to Reverend Miloslava, a scholar and refugee from Königsberg (the



same town from where Chief Rabbi Lord Immanuel Jakobovitz hailed), who had endured Kristallnacht but managed to escape and also find refuge in England. Miloslava had been studying for semicha in Germany but while never continuing his studies in England was nevertheless a learned man and teacher.

Miloslava introduced Aaron to Alter the Sofer, who presented him with a Sefer Torah received from the Jewish Museum of Prague. Despite its weight, its beauty was undeniable – thick, polished klaf (parchment), possibly Polish in origin, with handles dating back to the late 19th century. Without hesitation, Aaron purchased it for his son David, unknowingly securing a piece of Jewish history that would endure through generations.

The Sefer Torah became a family treasure, but its purpose was never to be kept in storage. Aaron's family had always believed in their personal motto: Be proud of who you are, but also share it.

Aaron and his family lived in Hampstead and were members of Dennington Park Road synagogue. Whilst the gift was for David, the family donated the Sefer to their shul and David read from it at his Bar Mitzvah – parshat Lech Lecha. David's son Avi, the grandson of Aaron, did the same, and eventually Avi's children and nephews read their Bar mitzvah parshiot from the same Sefer Torah.

When Avi's family moved to Hendon, the Sefer Torah was loaned to Ner Yisrael synagogue, but over time it was used less frequently, spending more and more time sitting in the back of the Aron Kodesh.

Then, when our own Magen Avot community was searching for a second Sefer Torah, word reached Avi. Without hesitation, he offered to lend it to us, ensuring it would not sit idle but instead continue to be a part of active Jewish life.

There is a profound and wonderful irony in the story of this Sefer Torah. What the Nazis once sought to display as an artefact of a vanished people is today read

from in a thriving Jewish community. The Torah is not merely a relic of the past; it is a living testament to survival, growth and regeneration. It travelled from Eastern Europe to England, through the hands of refugees and survivors, and into the embrace of a new generation.

This is the Jewish story: exile and return, loss and renewal. Each refugee, Sephardi or Ashkenazi – whether from Georgia, Germany, Poland, or Prague – reinvented themselves, contributing to their new societies while holding fast to their heritage. And this Sefer Torah, once taken in an attempt to erase Jewish existence, continues to be read from on special Shabbatot and chagim, ensuring that Jewish life not only endures but flourishes.

The weight of the Sefer Torah, both literal and historical, serves as a reminder that the past is always with us – but so too is the strength to carry it forward.

Now... Hagba Sefer Sheni anyone? ■

**This story was told to your author by Avi Djanogly, whose brother-in-law's parents-in-laws are members of Magen Avot. Avi deals in antiques and estimates his father's Sefer Torah dates back to 1890, based on the wooden handles and klaf, and was likely from Poland.*

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Eden loves the sense of family and community in his Norwood home where he now proudly lives his own life. I no longer have to worry about him.



THE MACCABIAH GAMES 'JEWISH PRIDE THROUGH SPORT'

by Simon Bentley

The Maccabiah Games are more than just a sporting event – they're a celebration of Jewish identity, unity and resilience. Bringing together athletes from all over the world, the games create lifelong friendships and a deep sense of connection between Jewish communities across the globe. The Maccabees, after whom the games are named, represent Jewish resistance and perseverance, reinforcing cultural pride.

Having spent most of my career in the sports retail and brands industry, I've had the privilege of attending the Maccabiah Games a number of times – not as an athlete, but as a proud father, watching my sons, Josh and Pauly, represent the UK in football. Pauly captained the team on an American pre-games trip, and I'll never

forget the last-minute equaliser scored by Josh against Israel.

The first Maccabiah Games took place on March 28, 1932, in British Mandate Palestine. Founded by Yosef Yekutieli, the games were created as a “Jewish Olympics” during a time of growing global antisemitism. Despite opposition from British authorities, 390 athletes from 18 countries competed in that inaugural event.

The second Maccabiah in 1935 saw a dramatic rise in participation, with over 1,300 athletes from 28 countries. What made it even more significant was that it allowed many European Jewish athletes to immigrate to Palestine – saving them from the horrors of the Holocaust.

World War II put the games on hold, but they returned in 1950, following the



Beyond the competition, the Maccabiah Games have produced some of the most moving moments in Jewish sports history. Here are just a few:

HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS COMPETING:

After WWII, many Jewish athletes who had survived the Holocaust competed as a way to reclaim their identity and strength. Some had lost their entire families but found a new purpose in Israel and sports. Ethiopian Runners: Ethiopian Jewish athletes, many of whom came to Israel through Operation Moses and Operation Solomon, have dominated long-distance running events. Their participation is a testament to Jewish unity across different cultures and backgrounds.

BRIDGING DIVIDES:

In 2009, a special exhibition match saw Jewish and Arab Israeli soccer players come together, proving that sport can serve as a bridge to peace.

A REUNION AGAINST ALL ODDS:

Two Jewish athletes from Poland, both survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto, reunited at the Maccabiah Games after decades apart. Each had assumed the other had perished in the war.

BREAKING BARRIERS IN WOMEN'S SPORTS:

Women's soccer was introduced to the Maccabiah in 2001, and since then, Jewish women worldwide have embraced the opportunity to compete. As one U.S. player put it: “We didn't just win for us – we won for every Jewish girl who was told she couldn't play.”

A LONE ATHLETE, NEVER ALONE:

In 2013, a single Jewish athlete from Chile walked into the opening ceremony holding his country's flag alone. The entire stadium gave him a standing ovation, showing that at the Maccabiah, no one is ever truly alone.

DEFYING THE ODDS:

A deaf Israeli gymnast won gold in rhythmic gymnastics in 2022, performing her entire routine without hearing the music – going purely off muscle memory. After her victory, she signed “thank you” to the crowd, who responded by waving their hands in sign language.

FAITH AND SPORT:

In 2017, for the first time, an Orthodox Jewish women's basketball team competed at the games, proving that religious observance and competitive sports can go hand in hand.

When it comes to asking questions this Pesach

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Ben Helfgott

Sir Ben Helfgott z'l

establishment of Medinat Yisrael, the State of Israel. This was a powerful statement: Jewish life had not only survived but thrived. One of the most inspiring figures of that era was Sir Ben Helfgott MBE z'l, a Holocaust survivor who went on to captain the British weightlifting team at the 1956 and 1960 Olympics. He was also a three-time gold champion in the lightweight class at the Maccabiah Games. I had the honour of working closely with him at Yad Vashem UK. He truly embodied the Maccabiah spirit.

By the 1960s and 1970s, the Maccabiah Games had gained official

recognition from the International Olympic Committee and had grown into one of the world's biggest sporting events. Today, they host over 10,000 athletes from more than 80 countries, competing in 40+ sports. The 2022 Maccabiah was the largest yet, making it the third-biggest sporting event in the world – right behind



Josh Bentley playing for Great Britain in the 2022 Maccabiah Games.

the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup.

Every four years, thousands of athletes gather in Israel, reaffirming a shared identity that stretches across generations and continents. The Maccabiah Games are not just about winning medals; they're about celebrating Jewish heritage, fostering unity and creating a lasting impact on athletes and spectators alike.

Whether it's through acts of perseverance, emotional reunions or moments of sportsmanship that transcend politics and conflict, the Maccabiah Games stand as a testament to the unbreakable spirit of the Jewish people.

While there are countless powerful anecdotes from the Maccabiah Games over the years, one in particular always stays with me. An American swimmer won gold in a freestyle race and broke down in tears on the podium. When asked why he was so emotional, he revealed that his grandfather had survived the Holocaust by swimming across a river to escape the Nazis. He dedicated the medal to his grandfather's memory, saying, "I swim because he swam." ■

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DR CHAYA LANGERMAN AND HER VOICE FOR THE ISRAELI HOSTAGES AND THEIR FAMILIES



by Dr. Fiona Taylor

In an exclusive interview with Dr. Fiona Taylor, Dr. Chaya Langerman opens up about her unwavering commitment to supporting the Israeli hostages held captive in Gaza. As a passionate advocate for their safe return, Chaya shares the emotional journey that has driven her to raise awareness, mobilise our community, and offer vital resources to those affected. Her insights shed light on the strength of solidarity during times of crisis and the deep personal connections that fuel her mission to bring hope to those who are suffering.

Can you tell me about the work you have been doing for the hostages and families since October 7, 2023?

After October 7th, I engaged with multiple informal organisations focused on mobilising UK support for the hostages. Given the rising antisemitism and shifting public sentiment against Israel, it was imperative to take a strategic approach to shaping the narrative and broadening advocacy efforts. To maximise impact, I collaborated not only within the Jewish

community but also with key allies in the Christian and Muslim communities, fostering a united front in support of the hostages.

Recognising the need for a more structured and coordinated effort, I formally joined the UK Hostage Forum nearly a year ago. Before that, I had already established strong connections with hostage families, leading efforts to organise high-impact events and vigils during their visits to the UK. These initiatives were designed to elevate their visibility in the UK media and engage with key negotiating countries such as Qatar, Egypt and Turkey, ensuring their plight remained at the forefront of diplomatic discussions. Additionally, understanding the financial hardships faced by some families, I helped drive fundraising efforts to provide essential support.

Have you managed to collaborate with the UK government, and what success have you had?

In September 2024, the UK Hostage Forum and Israel Hostage Forum co-organised a delegation of hostage families to attend various party conferences, leveraging these events as a platform to engage directly with as many MPs as possible. I accompanied the families to the Labour Party Conference in Liverpool, where they held back-to-back meetings with MPs throughout the day, sharing their loved ones' stories and urging MPs to take personal action for their return.

This experience was deeply moving — hearing firsthand accounts from mothers, brothers, granddaughters, daughters and nieces underscored the urgency of the situation. It became clear that we needed a more structured and impactful commitment from MPs beyond just a meeting. This led to the inception of the Twinning Initiative — at the conclusion of

each meeting, I asked MPs if they would agree to be “twinned” with a hostage. This meant they would personally advocate for them, maintain direct contact with the family, and serve as their voice within the UK Parliament. Many MPs readily agreed.

Following the conference, we systematically followed up with each MP to confirm their commitment, ultimately securing over 20 MPs. To support this initiative, we assembled a team of 60 dedicated volunteers responsible for interpreting, editing, designing and compiling information packages on each hostage. This extensive effort took several months, and by late 2024, we began distributing customised advocacy packs to MPs and arranging virtual meetings between them and hostage families.

This project remains ongoing, and next week (March 2025), we are facilitating a major delegation of hostage families to meet their twinned MPs in person. The impact of this initiative extends beyond providing families with a direct parliamentary point of contact – it ensures that MPs form a personal connection with the hostage they represent, equipping them to advocate more effectively on their behalf.

What has it felt like for you and how does it affect your day-to-day life?

Being so deeply involved in activism for Israel and the hostages, and forming close relationships with their families, has been both incredibly meaningful and emotionally overwhelming. The rollercoaster of hope and heartbreak has been hard to navigate, but I’ve tried to channel those emotions into positive action—doing something in honour of the hostages and their families.

Some of the toughest moments came when a hostage deal seemed within reach, only to fall apart at the last minute. Watching families go from hope to devastation was unbearable. More recently, the return of hostages’ bodies to Israel hit especially hard, particularly in cases where we didn’t know they had been murdered in captivity. The loss of Oded Lifshitz and Zachi Idan, both with British ties, was incredibly painful.

At the same time, there have been moments of pure relief and joy – like when the female soldiers – Agam, Karina, Liri and Naama – were finally freed. In the UK, we worked on campaigns dedicated to hostages with British connections, which made Emily Damari’s release an incredibly emotional moment for us. But joy was quickly replaced with sorrow

when we learned of the deaths of others.

On the darkest days, like when six hostages were brutally executed, we, the volunteers, came together – to pray, to grieve, and to find some comfort in each other. Those moments of unity reminded us why we keep going – why we must keep fighting for those still in captivity.

How do you see your role going forwards?

Recently, I joined the US-Israel Engagement Committee, hoping that this platform will help me organise activities across different communities in the UK – something that has remained a challenge over the past 16 months.

It’s difficult to measure the exact impact of every vigil, event or conversation we initiate, but we firmly believe that every action, no matter how small, contributes to our broader goal – bringing the hostages home.

A new organisation, Kamim, has been established to support hostages and their families after their return. Once all the hostages are home, I hope to actively support this initiative. I see this as a mission – an essential part of the post-October 7th reality. Their recovery won’t happen overnight, and we need to understand their individual needs and the best ways to support them as they rebuild their lives.

We all long for the day when we can hug the hostages, hear from them, and stand with them in their journey forward. I have no doubt that there will be opportunities to do so in the future. But for now, they need peace and quiet with their families, the space to heal, and the time to process everything they have endured. When they are ready, we will be there to listen, support and amplify their voices.

How do you think people can help?

This is a hard question that I get asked a lot, and I’m not in a position to tell people what to do or what part to take in the ongoing activism. However, I believe people can help in various ways, even if they aren’t in a leadership role. Presence and support – whether physical or virtual – are incredibly meaningful and show solidarity. There’s also a broader, ongoing agenda against antisemitism, particularly in the UK, where we are witnessing increasingly troubling incidents. One key

way to help is by directly engaging with lawmakers – writing to MPs, making complaints, and publicly voicing concerns. Don’t rely on others to speak up; each of us can contribute to this ongoing struggle. We can all make a difference within our own “bubbles” – whether that’s in the workplace, at university, with neighbours, or with the other people we come into contact with daily. I hope that more people will find the courage to speak up and take action, no matter the setting. ■



We all long for the day when we can hug the hostages, hear from them, and stand with them in their journey forward. I have no doubt that there will be opportunities to do so in the future.

SPREADING LIGHT IN A DARK WORLD



by Rabbi Michael Pollak

Last summer I was asked to appear on a panel at a conference celebrating the blossoming of the diversity, equity and inclusion policies at a London-based university. My particular topic was “Intersectionality and Religious Discrimination.” There have been many a fish flapping on dry land that have felt more at home than I did when I took my seat on the dais. My co-panellists represented the ultimate in intersectional underprivilege. A real Spaghetti Junction of criss-crossing disadvantage. I, on the other hand, radiated privilege: white, male, middle-class, public school, and most radiantly privileged – Jewish.

I decided to go into full attack mode. I argued that whilst intersectionality of victims was interesting, more worryingly, I suggested, was the issue of intersectionality of perpetrators. The self-same concoction of disadvantage

that was characteristic of victims seemed to be prevalent amongst perpetrators. Working-class uneducated people on welfare or impoverished immigrants of certain faith groups were as likely to be the purveyors of discrimination as they were victims. In the hope of triggering some self-realisation on the panel and in the audience I reported on the coverage of the 1929 massacre of Jews in Chevron. Jewish educators emphasised the murder of nearly 70 Jewish inhabitants at the hands of a barbarous Arab mob, whilst rarely mentioning the large number of Jews who were hidden by their Arab neighbours at the possible cost of their own lives. We were victims who had failed to recognise the heroism of our Arab neighbours and so had become discriminators ourselves.

I twinned my mea culpa with a reflection on the Pesach holiday. The last six days of Pesach are rather different to



Each and every one of our Festivals contains enough light by way of its customs and understanding of humanity that we can dispel so much of the darkness surrounding us. Who knows if they start listening to us about the events in Ancient Egypt they will find a way of understanding what we say about modern Israel too?

all our other Festivals. The celebration is muted. There is a complete mood change from the wine and song of the Seder nights. On these last days of Pesach we commemorate but we do not celebrate the Exodus from Egypt. Having left Egypt the Children of Israel arrive at the Red Sea. They seem doomed. Pharaoh's chariots are closing in on their rearguard and there can be no possible escape through the fierce currents of the Red Sea to the fore. At the moment of greatest despair the Bible's most iconic miracle offers them salvation. The waters of the Red Sea divide and a pathway appears for them to make their getaway. Once they are safe the waters come crashing down on the Egyptian army. You might reasonably think that it is time to pour out more wine and join together in song!

You would, however, be utterly wrong. We do not find joy from inflicting pain on our enemies. There is nothing to celebrate in the death of our foes no matter how much evil they visited upon us. The idea is expressed most explicitly in the Talmud:

The Egyptians were drowning in the sea. At the same time, the angels wanted to sing before God, and the Lord, God, said to them: 'My creations are drowning and you are singing!' (Megillah 10)

The angels were silenced. Our festival celebrations are muffled. War requires inhumanity but Jewish writers across the ages and across the spectrum of opinion have been clear – we must never allow that inhumanity to demean us by letting us diminish the value of other human lives.

In conclusion I sprinkled a touch of scholarly comment from Philo of Alexandria who wrote in first century:

For though the slaughter of enemies is lawful, yet one who kills a man, even if he does so justly and in self-defence and under compulsion, has something to answer for, in view of the primal common kinship of mankind.

The good news was that it went down very well. One member of the audience announced that she had never heard someone Jewish speak before but would be looking out for more opportunities to hear more from Jewish speakers! For me, the takeaway was the richness of Judaism's message to mankind. At times when it seems the world is not listening to us, we might think that we should abandon our role as "a light to the nations." That is a mistake. "The Duties of the Heart" is a medieval classic of Jewish thought. Written in 11th-century Spain by Rav Bachya ibn Pekuda he coined the phrase:

A very small ray of light can diminish much evil.

Each and every one of our Festivals contains enough light by way of its customs and understanding of humanity that we can dispel so much of the darkness surrounding us. Who knows if they start listening to us about the events in Ancient Egypt they will find a way of understanding what we say about modern Israel too? ■

This is a version of the speech given by Yehudit Finfer as part of the women's presentations at the 'Breakfast and Learn' Simchat Torah programme. Her theme of 'Achdut' – togetherness – resonates today during these challenging times in Israel and the Diaspora.

SIMCHAT TORAH 2024

REFLECTIONS ON ACHDUT ONE YEAR ON

by Yehudit Finfer

Since it's my first time speaking in a shul, I thought I would do the traditional thing and open with an old Jewish joke that we all know: A Jew has been stranded for some time on a desert island. When his rescuers arrive they discover that he's built three huts on the island. One is his home but what of the other two? They ask the man and he explains that one is the shul he goes to – the other – that's the shul he won't set foot in (!) The joke riffs on the quality of us Jews being opinionated and argumentative, but it's fundamentally told with a laugh and therefore with some affection.

I thought of the joke again, when I saw a panel show that some may know, with Victoria Coren Mitchell, called 'Only Connect'; it's a clever, brain-teasing game in which two teams are pitted against one another. One of the teams recently was made up of a group of three young Jewish men; all were visibly Jewish in their kippot. They had to choose a name for their team, and the name they had chosen was 'Four Opinions'. Again, this was an affectionate nod to the notion that where you find three Jews you'll also find four opinions.

Does this contentious, disputatious quality go deeper than a national, inherited quality that we've carried since biblical times? It seems to me that it does – and that in fact it's an essential part of our tradition, including the transmission of our tradition – and indeed of our mission in the world.

Today we will start to read the book of Bereishit. In the 11th chapter we have a

brief but fascinating account of the tower of Babel, in which a group of people attempt to build a tower to the heavens but are prevented in this goal by God. The story opens telling us that: 'The whole earth was of one language' and of "*dvarim achadim*" which is variously understood as meaning one purpose, one tongue, or one mind. The builders – with their unified stance – set about building a tower to the heavens, but God Himself comes down and quashes their attempts, which we're told He does by diversifying their language.

But what was the sin of these builders? And wasn't their unity a positive force?

Traditionally, two answers are given to this question. For some the sin was considered theological: the attempt to reach the heavens is seen as being one of ultimate hubris along with its desire to wage war with God. Others see the sin through a political lens. The Netziv writing in 19th-century Poland was one of these. He saw the motivation of Babel to be that of creating a totalitarian state in which uniformity was to be enforced. In his interesting reading, the high tower was to function as a look-out, a vantage point which would ensure that nobody could deviate from this enforced conformity. For the Netziv, the sin of the builders of Babel was the prohibition of disagreement. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l pointed out, this approach cannot coexist with the goals that God has for the world. We need freedom to disagree in order to pursue our goals of truth and justice on this earth.

So we see that disagreement is a necessary part of our tradition. Our Jewish texts are a wonderful representation of this. From the multiple commentaries written in our chumashim, to the Talmud with its central text surrounded by questions, opinions, ideas and counter-ideas. The way that we pass along our tradition on Seder night to the next generation is through questions and polemic and our *batei midrash* have been kept alive over the centuries by the debates, discussions, agreements and disagreements that have permeated their walls.

Unfortunately we also know that there is a bitter flip side to this. During the Second Temple period, the Jews were considered pious, but nonetheless their holy Temple was destroyed due to their sin of '*sinat chinam*', the groundless hatred for one another that was endemic to Jewish national life. And indeed, it appears that we are still guilty of this. The Talmud tells us if a generation were to rectify the sin of *sinat chinam* that originally caused the



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destruction, the Temple would be rebuilt immediately. Sadly it seems, we have still not remedied this sin.

The notion of *'achdut'*, oneness, that God desires of His people seems to link directly to the *echad* – the oneness – of God. Our understanding of God is associated with Him being One. Although this is a mystical and complex idea, it is central to our conception of God, as we state multiple times daily: *'Hashem elokeinu hashem echad'*. And as God in one in Heaven, we, His representatives on earth, are called upon to mimic this oneness – by our unity. We say in our tefillah: *'Atah echad veshimcha echad umi keamcha yisrael goy echad baaretz'*. You are one and Your Name is one, and who is like Your people Israel, one nation on earth. There was one pivotal moment, the moment of Sinai, when we succeeded in attaining the level of *achdut* that God wants of us, and that was when we accepted the Torah *'k'ish echad b'lev echad'*, like one person with one heart. It is this moment that we have been called upon to aspire to ever since.

It seems that God asks us Jews to tread a difficult tightrope. Be diverse, be different – but also, retain your unity. The *'echad'* He seeks of us is not the *'dvarim achadim'* of Babel, a totalitarian, conforming 'oneness' which is anathema to God. But *achdut* like that unity of Sinai, is what God seeks. In Hebrew we might say that the objective is *'achdut v'lo achidut'* – to be unified without being uniform. So we must debate by all means and even disagree intensely – but we must not allow this to tip over into the terrible sin of hatred for one another.

On this day of Simchat Torah, exactly one year ago, for many of us while here in these very walls, we heard the first awful whisperings of something terrible having happened in Israel. What followed is something none of us could have imagined – a truly hellish nightmare. The trauma was, and remains, very real. For me and perhaps for many, there was just one ray of light in the midst of the unbearable darkness, and that was the display of *achdut* that was evident immediately. Both within Israel and outside of Israel the sense of unity and brotherhood, of care and connection, of love and support... The bonds between us as Jews became renewed and reaffirmed and stood out as one beacon of comfort in the midst of the most horrible pain. People who on the 6th of October could see only difference and distance between themselves and other Jews recognised in an instant that we are on the same team – that though we may differ in the particulars, we are bonded in our essence. Perhaps in

some special moments, we even succeeded in attaining some of that coveted unity, the lofty *'lev echad' achdut* of Sinai.

We all hoped that the *achdut* would last, but sadly, we are already starting to see the cracks. The effort to remain unified while holding starkly opposing views is incredibly difficult, particularly in Israel, in the current reality where the stakes feel so high. The goals of *achdut* seem such an elusive challenge for us.

But can it really be the case that as a nation we are only able to achieve this goal of unity in response to tragedy? Are we able to attain *"achdut"* without the presence of a physical enemy to remind us of all the past – and please God of the future – that we have in common?

There are no easy answers to this challenge but it is exciting to know that before 7 October and certainly since then, many are addressing this question, thinking individually and together about how we can improve *achdut* both in Israel and beyond. We all know of the wonderful work of the Geshet organisation, who have sent representatives to our shul in the past and whose stated mission is to bridge the great religious divides, particularly in Israel. It was Rav Kook who first described *'ahavat chinam'* – groundless love – as the antidote to *'sinat chinam'* – groundless hate. Lori Palatnik, a Jewish educator, extends this notion to *'ahava b'chavana'* – intentional love of the other. She believes that it can be through women that this goal will be achieved as it is women who have brought about the redemption of our people in the past. She set up an organisation of female leaders spanning the spectrum of political and religious Israeli life to work toward achieving these ideals of unity.

And efforts toward *achdut* have occurred on smaller, grassroots levels too. Soon after 7 October, a group of rabbis in Atlanta, in direct response to that old desert island joke that I opened this talk with, decided to each swap podiums with one another, without informing their congregants. The idea was

that, yes the familiar joke is lighthearted but now is the time to forego differences, even of the jokey kind. Let there be no shul in which it can be said that we won't set foot. Let us rather demonstrate actively our efforts in *'ahavat chinam'*, in intentional displays of *'ahava b'chavana'*.

On this very emotionally difficult day, we pray with all our hearts that God Himself will come to bring comfort to all those mourning their heavy losses. We pray that He will help bring our hostages home *b'shalom*, that He will help our courageous soldiers return *b'shalom*, and that He might help us vanquish our enemies and restore lasting *shalom* to Israel.

And for our part, what might we commit to God? Perhaps we can all use this moment to think about our practice of *achdut* – to say that we will make personal efforts ourselves to work on the responsibility we each bear for *shalom* between us and our fellow Jews. Whether it be in our speech about others, in our judgements of others, maybe in our efforts to actively reach out to communicate with Jews who think differently to us.. Let us use the momentum of our increased positive feelings of *achdut* during the past year and not allow this energy to dissipate or disappear in the year ahead.

Let's recognise that like every parent, our father God looks down upon His diverse, disparate, headstrong children and wishes to see unity among us – above all else. ■



MAGEN AVOT BOOK CLUB



The Book Club continues to meet in person every six weeks or so and has attracted new committed bibliophiles, and each new book has stimulated vigorous and sometimes trenchant debate. The discussions are friendly and often extend beyond the narrow confines of the book under discussion. Recently we have read :- “My Name Is Asher Lev” by Chaim Potok, “The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store “ by James McBride, “Three Floors Up” by Eshkol Nevo, and “Cutting for Stone” by Abraham Verghese.

The next meeting will take place on Monday 5th May 2025. All members and their friends are welcome and details can be found here: <https://tinyurl.com/MABookC>



AGM ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Magen Avot Annual General Meeting and welcoming the new board and executive members

We are pleased to invite all members to Magen Avot’s Annual General Meeting on **11th May 2025 at 6pm, held at Shul**. This is a vital opportunity to review the past year, discuss future plans, and to welcome the new board and executive members. Your involvement ensures our kehillah continues to thrive.

Nominations for board positions will be open soon and details will be sent out via email and WhatsApp.

MAGEN AVOT'S ETHOS:

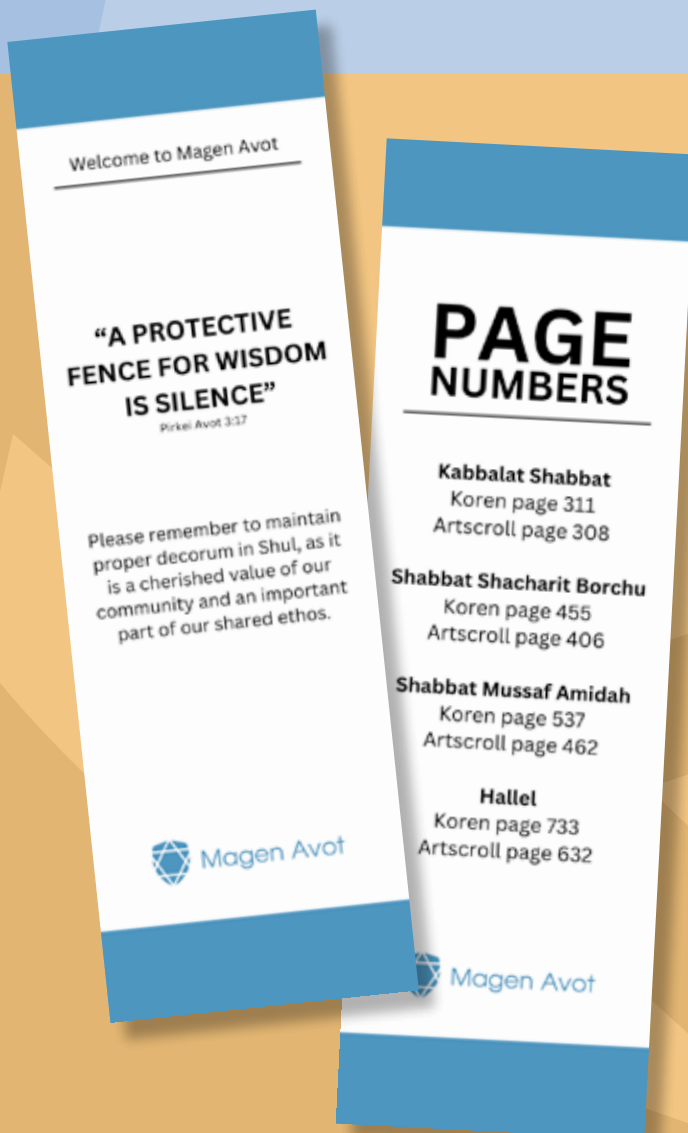
Magen Avot is a dynamic and welcoming Jewish community, established in 2015 with the support of Chief Rabbi Sir Ephraim Mirvis KBE and the United Synagogue. Based in Hendon, we provide a warm and inclusive environment for individuals and families seeking meaningful Jewish connection, learning, and spiritual growth. Our kehilla gathers in the Nancy Reuben Primary School Hall, creating a space for prayer, Torah study, and communal engagement.

A major milestone in our development was the appointment of Rabbi Yoni and Rebbetzen Dina Golker in 2022, following a community-wide vote. Their leadership has strengthened our vision of a thriving, Torah-centered community, building on the dedication of our previous rabbinic couple, Rabbi Joel and Sarah Kenigsberg.

As we continue to grow, Magen Avot remains committed to fostering a sense of belonging, inspiring religious and personal development, and creating a supportive environment for all who seek a vibrant Jewish life.

OUR ETHOS

1. Modern, orthodox, inclusive community that is welcoming to all
2. Provision of opportunities for learning that are both intellectually and spiritually stimulating
3. Promotion of women's involvement and ways of making women feel included within halachic guidelines set out by the United Synagogue and Chief Rabbi Sir Ephraim Mirvis KBE
4. Promotion of good decorum in shul
5. Supportive of Israel and its national holidays
6. Involvement and encouragement of children and youth
7. To support and advocate for the interests of those in need including persecuted groups in the UK and abroad, consistent with Torah principles



OUR NEW BOOKMARKS

In 2015, when Magen Avot began, we produced bookmarks promoting our ethos of maintaining proper decorum in Shul. Though they disappeared over time, our commitment to this standard has remained strong, and today, Magen Avot enjoys unparalleled decorum. Recently, we reinstated these bookmarks to reinforce this ethos and provide a quick guide to Shabbat page numbers, something members had requested. We hope these bookmarks will become a staple in Shul, serving as both a reminder of our values and a helpful companion for attendees over Shabbat. Look out for them and help us uphold our cherished atmosphere.

CHESED IN THE MAGEN AVOT COMMUNITY

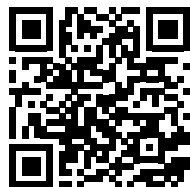
The Magen Avot community continues to embody the values of **chesed**, **tzedakah**, and **mishpat**, working tirelessly to support those in need both within our own kehilla and beyond. This past year has been another testament to the unwavering commitment of our members to acts of loving-kindness, ensuring that no one is left behind in times of hardship. ■

SUPPORTING LOCAL FOOD BANKS

Food insecurity remains a pressing challenge across London, and Magen Avot has once again played a vital role in providing essential supplies to those facing hardship. Through our partnerships with local food banks, we have facilitated the collection and distribution of food and household necessities, ensuring that individuals and families have access to nutritious meals. Volunteers from our community have generously given their time to assist with sorting, packing, and delivering donations, strengthening the support network for those in need. ■



Scan here for more info or to get involved



CLOTHING AND ESSENTIALS FOR THE HOMELESS

With the winter months posing additional challenges for rough sleepers, Magen Avot members have rallied together to provide warm clothing, hygiene products, and other essentials. The success of our recent collection drive



demonstrates the compassion of our community, as we assembled and distributed care packages directly to those in need. This initiative not only offered practical support but also reinforced our commitment to **chesed** and **tikkun olam**—repairing the world through kindness and generosity. ■

ADVOCACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Beyond immediate aid, our community remains dedicated to social justice causes. We have continued our engagement with organisations that combat modern slavery and human trafficking, raising awareness and advocating for vulnerable individuals. By standing up for justice, we ensure that **chesed** is not only about charity but also about creating lasting change.

Magen Avot remains steadfast in its mission to uphold the values of **chesed**, ensuring that we act as a beacon of kindness, generosity, and justice within the wider world. ■

לשנה הבאה בירושלים

Wishing our wonderful Magen Avot community a happy Pesach. We look forward to seeing our Shul continue to thrive and grow. Grateful thanks to Rabbi and Rebbetzin Golker, the Executive and Council for all their hard work.

Karina, Ashley,
Joey and Minna Katz

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MAGEN MINIS AND MAXIS

MAGEN MINIS WITH ARIELLA OVITS: A YEAR OF GROWTH AND JOY!

Over the past year, it has been a delight to watch Magen Minis flourish! Designed for children aged two-to-six, this special service introduces our youngest members to the foundations of davening through engaging songs, interactive activities and Shabbat-themed fun.

From singing lively Shabbat melodies to role-playing the preparations for Shabbat – such as “cooking” their own toy chicken soup – each session is carefully crafted to make Jewish learning both exciting and



meaningful.

A highlight of Magen Minis (and its older counterpart, Magen Maxis) is the Magen Medals reward system. Children earn medals for attendance and participation, which they can redeem at our vibrant Magen Market for a variety of exciting prizes. Additionally, the

Horim V'Yeladim initiative – led by Rafi – challenges children to get creative in preparation for the upcoming chagim. Before Chanukah, for example, children were invited to design their own



Chanukiah from household items, resulting in some truly imaginative creations!

This innovative approach has been key to the growth and success of all our children’s programmes. And with summer fast approaching, Rafi and I are excited to introduce even more events and initiatives – so stay tuned for another fantastic season of fun, learning and community spirit! ■

MAGEN MAXIS WITH RAFI KLEIMAN: A YEAR OF ENGAGEMENT AND EXCITEMENT!



It has been an incredible year so far for Magen Maxis, our thriving children’s service for six- to 11-year-olds! With over a dozen regular attendees each week, Magen Maxis is far more than just a tefillah group – it’s a dynamic and interactive experience that brings the depth and beauty of Shabbat morning davening to life.

Each session begins at 10:45 am, with participants sharing their weekly highlights before the selection of a Chazan and a Siddur Monitor. Then comes the much-anticipated “Bonus



Question” – a Parasha-based challenge where a correct answer earns a coveted Magen Medal! At 11:45 am, the session concludes with the historic

“Picture Raffle,” where additional Magen Medals are awarded for outstanding davening and participation. And of course, no Magen Maxis gathering is complete without a delicious spread of

Magen Munchies – ensuring that both the spirits and stomachs of our young participants are well-nourished!

Beyond Shabbat mornings, Magen Maxis participants have also enjoyed an action-packed Horim V'Yeladim season, with over 30 children and parents engaging in meaningful parent-child learning each Motzei Shabbat. Highlights of this year’s programme have included:

- The Build Your Own Chanukiah competition
- The ever-popular Weekly Raffle
- The much-loved Magen Market, where children redeem their hard-earned Magen Medals for exciting prizes

As we look ahead, we can’t wait to continue creating meaningful experiences and inspiring the next generation of our community. Here’s to another fantastic year of learning, laughter and connection at Magen Avot! ■



YOUR Y@MA

by Sophie Kleiman

Writing this in my fourth year of running Y@MA (the wonderful Youth at Magen Avot), I can't help but reflect on what an incredible journey it has been. Leading such a dynamic, inspiring, educated, passionate, fun, and—most importantly—genuinely lovely group of young people is a true privilege.

Every week, I not only guide but also learn from them, gaining so much from our discussions and, of course, enjoying their company at our famous sushi kiddushim (main shul—be jealous!).

We explore and engage with ideas from the parasha through a mix of games, activities, debates, and more. I'm constantly blown away by the knowledge and enthusiasm our teenagers at Magen Avot bring to the table, tackling topics ranging from Jewish identity and our role in Torah today to the evolving place of women in Judaism.

Beyond our regular Shabbat programming, this past year has been filled with fantastic events. Highlights include our *Rosh Hashanah Simanim Seuda*, a deep dive into *Al Chet* on Yom Kippur, a Sukkah Crawl around the community, Chanukah ice skating, and a Shabbat lunch at the Golkers' so big they had to borrow chairs from the neighbours on the day!

The standout event for me had to be our Rosh Hashanah “community

packing” initiative. Y@MA went beyond simply assembling food and hygiene packs at shul on a Sunday morning—we took the extra step of travelling into town to personally hand them out to homeless individuals. The kiddush Hashem was immense, especially when one group was recognized as Jewish and wished a “Happy New Year.” Seeing the smiles we brought to people's faces was a powerful reminder of the privilege many of us have and the true essence of giving.

We've also continued our visits to the local Wohl Court in small groups, sharing kiddush and conversations with the residents. A huge thank you to Richard Taylor for helping to organize this initiative. The generosity and sense of responsibility our teens show at these events are inspiring, and their willingness to step beyond themselves and give to the wider community shines through—not just on special occasions, but week after week.

We greatly miss Shira Neville, who made aliyah in October, and we look forward to welcoming a new youth director soon. With many exciting events ahead—especially our shabbaton in Brighton at the end of March—we can't wait to see what's next for Y@MA.

Thank you, Magen Avot, for being such a warm and wonderful community. I have loved every second of being part of it and leading Y@MA over the past few years!

CHAG SAMEACH! ■



Y@MA distributing hygiene packs to the homeless



The standout event for me had to be our Rosh Hashanah “community packing” initiative. Y@MA went beyond simply assembling food and hygiene packs at shul on a Sunday morning—we took the extra step of travelling into town to personally hand them out to homeless individuals.

PESACH RECIPES

by Master Baker Jack Maurer



ALMOND MACAROONS

INGREDIENTS

8 oz Ground Almonds
1 lb Granulated Sugar
The Whites of 2 Large Eggs lightly whisked
almond essence if desired

METHOD

- Mix almonds and sugar together
- Mix in whites
- Pipe onto lined trays
- Place half a blanched almond on top if available
- Bake at 350f. (time is dependant on size piped)
- Over baking will result in hard biscuits

CHOCOLATE CAKE

INGREDIENTS

4 oz Margarine
4 oz Caster Sugar
4 Eggs Separated
4 oz Ground Almonds
3 oz Fine Matzo Meal
4 oz Grated Chocolate
Grated rind of half an orange
Juice of 1 large orange

METHOD

- Line an 8 inch cake tin, Cream margarine and sugar until light and fluffy
- Beat in egg yolks and fold in rest of the ingredients
- Whisk egg whites until stiff then fold into the rest of the mixture
- Gently turn the batter into prepared tin
- Bake at 325f. for approximately 50 minutes
- Leave to cool in tin for a few minutes then turn onto wire to cool
- Can be decorated or eaten on it's own or with ice cream or fresh fruit salad

CINNAMON BALLS

INGREDIENTS

8 oz Ground Almonds
10 oz Caster Sugar
1 oz Cinnamon
4 Egg Whites
Icing sugar

METHOD

- Mix all dry ingredients well
- Whisk whites to stiff froth and fold in
- Mix thoroughly and form small balls
- Bake at 350f. till set (approx 20 mins)
- It is better to slightly under bake, this is variable depending on size
- Immediately after baking roll in icing sugar

COCONUT PYRAMIDS

INGREDIENTS

1lb Coconut
10 oz Caster Sugar
2 eggs

METHOD

- Mix coconut and sugar together
- Add the eggs and mix thoroughly
- A little lemon juice can be added to enhance the mix
- Dip hands in cold water and form pyramids
- Bake on non stick trays or non stick paper at 375f. till lightly brown
- Don't over bake

GATEAU:

A rich moist cake in which ground almonds predominate.

INGREDIENTS

5 oz caster sugar
4 oz margarine
3.5 oz ground almonds
1.5 oz potato flour
3 eggs
A liquor size glass of kirsch or any other flavour

METHOD

- Cream the margarine add the sugar and cream until white
- Add the ground almonds and continue creaming for 2-3 minutes
- Beat in the eggs and fold in the potato flour and finally gently mix in flavouring
- Turn into prepared tin and bake in a very moderate oven for 40-50 minutes
- This gateau keeps very well and can be eaten on its own
- However it can be decorated as required

HOLLANDAISE

INGREDIENTS

8 oz Margarine
8 oz Granulated sugar
8 oz Ground almonds
8 oz (4 large) Eggs

METHOD

- Melt the margarine till it is quite hot
- Place the almonds and sugar into a bowl
- Mix well together stir in the eggs, beating slightly
- Finally mix in the hot melted margarine stirring well to clear
- Pour filling into prepared jammed pastry case
- You can sprinkle flaked almonds on top, ice the top or leave plain
- Mixture makes an excellent moist dessert

- Bake in moderate oven (350f) for approximately 35-40 mins

PESACH CHOUX PASTRY

INGREDIENTS

8 oz Vegetable Oil
16 oz Water
0.5 oz Salt
Place in a pan and bring to a rolling boil
10 oz Fine matzo meal
18 oz (9 large) Eggs

METHOD

- Take the vegetable oil, water and salt - place in a pan and bring to a rolling boil
- Add the fine matzo meal in a steady stream stirring constantly
- Mix to a paste and allow the paste to cool slightly
- Add the eggs to the paste in 4 or 5 stages mixing and clearing after each addition
- The mixture should have the same consistency as normal choux pastry
- Pipe the choux pastry as usual
- Take special care in the baking temperature (380 f. - 385-f.)
- Be careful not to open the oven door too soon
- When cool the shells can be filled with cream, custard etc.

PESACH SPONGE CAKE

INGREDIENTS

6 oz Sugar
9 oz Eggs
3 oz Cake meal
3 oz Potato starch
1 oz Sugar
3 oz Egg whites
Rind of 3 lemons

METHOD

- Whisk the egg, sugar, until light and thick (marks of the whisk are seen)
- Blend together the dry ingredients and fold gently into the above
- Whisk the egg whites and sugar (don't over whip)
- Then fold into the the sponge mixture and finally stir in the lemon rind
- Deposit into prepared paper cases or tins
- Baking temperature at 355°F until sponge springs back

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