



A SPIRITUAL REFUGE

The Big Belsize Brolly

CREATING SPACE FOR ALL JEWS

Rabbi Gabriel Botnick

In my Kol Nidrei sermon this year, I spoke about the importance of creating an inclusive community where all Jews can feel safe, regardless of their political differences. And in light of the attack on a synagogue in Manchester on Yom Kippur morning, this message feels more urgent than ever.

Over the past two years, a number of members have asked why I haven't been more outspoken about the war between Israel and Hamas. Despite the fact that a ceasefire is in place as I write this, the deeper question still remains: how do we maintain community in the face of events that lead us to hold divergent views?

Our community includes people who don't believe that Israel should exist as a Jewish state, as well as people who unquestioningly support Israeli government actions, but most of us tend to fall somewhere in between. Taking a public stand favouring one perspective risks alienating large portions of our membership. We've seen other London synagogues lose members over rabbis making polarising statements. But my reluctance to specify my position isn't just about numbers – it's about preserving Belsize Square Synagogue as a safe refuge for Jews of every outlook.

And we desperately need that refuge. A congregant had their summer holiday in Spain spoilt by a tour guide who launched into a tirade, not against Israel, but against Jews in general. There is a retailer in Germany who recently displayed a sign in his shop window saying: 'JEWS are banned from here!!!! Nothing personal. Not even antisemitism. I just can't stand you.' Another congregant was harassed by neighbours, publicly accused of supporting genocide, and had their name and picture distributed around the neighbourhood – not for anything they said about Israel or Gaza, but simply for being Jewish. It got so bad they had to move out of London. And of course, there's Manchester. The people who perpetrate these attacks don't care about our politics – rather their hatred is aimed at all Jews, full stop.

In the 86 years since our Synagogue's founding, we've never needed a safe space for all Jews more desperately. Belsize was founded on precisely this principle. At the outset, we served as a spiritual haven for German Jewish émigrés of all backgrounds. Orthodox Jews gathered with agnostics. Berliners prayed alongside Frankfurters. There were even public forums debating whether to establish a Jewish State in Palestine, with the community widely split! Yet despite our differences, that Big Belsize Umbrella welcomed all Jews seeking shelter.

But maintaining an inclusive community isn't easy. It requires self-awareness and self-restraint from all of us. Any time we look at someone with whom we disagree and label them as 'other', we weaken the foundation on which community is built. In fact, it is an incredibly slippery and treacherous slope when we focus more on our differences than on what we have in common.

In my sermon, I spoke of the differences between Hillel and Shammai, two first-century BCE sages who disagreed respectfully and modelled how to argue for the sake of understanding Torah, rather than for personal victory. However, while their students initially maintained this civility, when political tensions rose and legal interpretations diverged, the dangers of 'othering' took hold.

continued on pages 2-3

IN THIS ISSUE

- 1 Letter from Rabbi Botnick
- 2 Synagogue Snapshot
- 3 Rembering Helen Grunberg
- 4 Our Hidden Treasure, BoD update
- 5 Hostages released
- 6 Local history: Finchley Road
- 7 The Beit Mitzvah mural
- 8 The stranger within and without
- 9 Bat Mitzvah project
- 10 New Sukkah,
Rembering Florence Benaiah
- 11 News from Abernein Mansions, BSS 2040
- 12 Services, Community news,
Synagogue help lines

SYNAGOGUE SNAPSHOT

Francesca Simon

Writer, author of the Horrid Henry series among many other works and now librettist



What's your favourite thing about your work?

I love writing. I write books, and more recently, libretti for opera and cantatas. I love the moment when I can see the whole, especially when I finish the inevitably 'bad' first draft and can start

working on making it better. The very best thing is seeing my book in bookshops, or performed on stage. I've just published my first book for adults, *Salka*, about the Welsh legend of a lake faerie, which was unexpected, but I follow the ideas where they lead, and this novel turned out to be more for adults and older teens than for children. I'm glad I can still surprise myself.

What I didn't know, until I started working with the composer Gavin Higgins on our opera *The Monstrous Child*, which was performed at the Royal Opera House in 2019, was how much fun it would be to collaborate with someone else. All those years I've worked alone, and then I discovered the joy of working with Gavin. We've gone on to write a cantata together which was performed at the Aldeburgh and Three Choirs Festivals in 2023, and we're currently working on a new cantata for Three Choirs in 2027.

What is the hardest part of your job?

The hardest part is balancing all the demands on my

time. I could easily spend every day not writing, and instead visiting schools, writing articles, giving talks, judging contests, etc.

If you could do any other job for one day, what would you choose?

I started playing the banjo four years ago, which gives me great joy. Learning an instrument as an adult is nothing like learning as a child, and I practice religiously every day (even when I had Covid!). If I could add ten years to my learning, I'd love to play in a folk band for the day.

How did you come to be a member of Belsize Square?

I grew up in Malibu, California and we were members of a Reconstructionist synagogue, but my family wasn't religious and we barely attended. I pleaded to go to Hebrew School (the first child ever with such a plea?) but my parents didn't want to drive me the 45 minutes each way so I was never Bat Mitzvah. (Cue gnashing of teeth!) When my son Josh was 7, he was keen to go to Sunday school, so we started visiting different shuls to see where we felt at home. My husband isn't Jewish and I didn't want to feel uncomfortable. My criterion was, would anyone notice we were new? We were ignored at the first shul we visited. But at Belsize, at a Friday night service, several people said hello and welcomed us, including Jimmy Strauss! The wonderful Rabbi Mariner came over as well after the service to chat and that was it. I ran the Adult Discussion Group for many years and I learned so much. I think Belsize is a place where people who come from away feel at home.

What's your favourite festival?

Definitely Pesach, as I think its celebration of freedom is universal.

Where do you like to sit in shul?

I like to sit near the front, in the centre, though I have tried both sides as well.

REMEMBERING

Helen Grunberg

It was with great sadness that the community learned of Helen's death on 25 September, at the age of 81. She had been a stalwart of Belsize Square Synagogue for decades and will be remembered by many as a constant presence at our services, synagogue events and classes, usually accompanied by the love of her life, her wife Sue.

Helen was much more than a regular shul-attender. As a long-time member of the Chevra Kadisha, she was one of the volunteers who prepare the deceased for burial in the traditional and respectful way. More than that, her support and comfort for the bereaved wove lasting memories, as the writer of this appreciation remembers with gratitude.



Helen and Sue

She did so many other tasks for the synagogue, quietly and without asking for thanks. She supported members at times of stress or loneliness, organised, made and served meals and refreshments at shul events

and took part in the Holocaust Education Programme for schools. And every two months she would help to pack and dispatch this magazine.

Helen's memorial prayers, led by Rabbi Botnick and Cantor Heller, celebrated 'this remarkable woman who really was always focused on celebrating everybody else around her, and never about herself. She would absolutely hate being the centre of attention.'

At her funeral and at the prayers, her wife Sue and her granddaughter Paige remembered Helen so movingly. Sue, accompanied by Helen's grandson Ben, spoke about how 'Helen has always been such a *mensch*. A person of honour and integrity. There aren't many people here today who have not been touched by her kindness.' They had met 50 years ago and been together for over 40 years. 'We were so overwhelmed 20 years ago when we had our civil partnership and Rabbi Mariner announced from the bimah that we were actually a couple. The love and friendship from the community at that time was so special.'

Paige's address included tributes that rang true for all present: 'To me and Ben she was Omi – a steady hand, a warm hug, a mentor and the person who taught me that love should be loud, because of its power. She was the kind of woman who did things not for recognition, but because they were right ... Omi had a gift for making everyone feel like they mattered. Whether it was a neighbour's child down the road or an elderly woman, [she] and Sue would pop in to see if they may need company – she always showed up. Not for attention. Not for credit. Just because that's who she was. She had a way of making you feel like you were the only person in the room, like your dreams mattered, and like no mistake was ever too big to forgive. It was magical. To my beautiful, fierce, loving, funny, sometimes stubborn, and brilliant grandmother: thank you. We will carry your light forward. We all will.'

continued from page 1

In one instance, during a hotly contested vote, the armed zealots from the School of Shammai trapped and killed over 3,000 followers of Hillel. Our sages say this day is second only to Tisha B'Av in tragedy.

Yet Hillel and Shammai themselves show us a different path. In *Pirkei Avot*, the *Ethics of the Fathers*, we learn: 'Any argument made for the sake of Heaven shall endure for all time.' Our sages offer Hillel and Shammai as the ideal example of such an enduring disagreement. An argument 'for the sake of Heaven' means the goal is

not to prove the other wrong or to be seen as right, but rather to arrive together at the best understanding of God's law. Their disagreements endured because they sought consensus regarding Torah law, not dominance over one another.

During my rabbinic training, my mentor Rabbi Ed Feinstein taught me a method for arriving at a deeper understanding of both ideas and opinions: asking 'why' not once or twice, but five times. *Pirkei Avot* advises: 'Don't look at a container, but rather what it contains.' If we look only at the surface of someone's opinion, we

miss what underlies their belief. By expressing curiosity and asking 'why' repeatedly, we can uncover core values.

So often in conversations about politics and current events, we focus only on surface policies. When discussing immigration, we might hear 'No asylum hotels in this community!' and immediately view someone as cold or unsympathetic. But after exploring what's behind their beliefs, we might come to learn that what they ultimately care about is creating stable, thriving communities – the very same value that could be fulfilled by helping

asylum seekers find stability. When we dig deeper, we often discover we share fundamental principles, even when we initially disagree on policy.

This is what I'm trying to model with the idea of the Big Belsize Brolly. If I rush to take a stance that risks alienating groups, we all lose the ability to have conversations that move beyond divisive policies toward identifying common core values. This approach matters now more than ever – not just regarding Israel and Gaza, but regarding all the political and social issues that threaten to divide us.

I encourage you not to avoid

difficult conversations about Israel and Gaza, immigration or other contentious topics. But approach them respectfully, lovingly. As *Pirkei Avot* instructs: 'Give everyone the benefit of the doubt.' Don't rush to label them as 'other' or vilify them for policies they support without understanding why. See them as no different from you: someone who feels strongly about core principles that you may very likely share.

The events of recent months have shown us how fragile Jewish safety is, even in places we thought secure. I understand that some of you wish I would say or do things

differently. But sometimes, in order to achieve a greater goal, we need to set aside certain desires that, although honourable and appealing, might actually prevent us from realising that larger vision.

As rabbi and steward of this community, my commitment is to honour our origins and ensure that Belsize remains a spiritual refuge where all Jews can feel safe, respected and at home, regardless of our many differences. In an increasingly fractured world, preserving spaces where we can disagree without dividing is not just important – it's essential.

Our Hidden Treasure

Changing direction in our Synagogue's library, Minyanman introduces two of his discoveries on the Fiction shelves, *Waiting for Leah* and *Bring Us the Old People*

"You're beautiful," I said, again.

"You're beautiful too," she replied in a whisper. "Also because you see things as better than they are. I'd like to be like that."

There is a gripping, painful resonance in *Waiting for Leah*, a brief love encounter that takes place during the last day at Terezin before the narrator is transported to his camp of final destination.

I first came across Arnošt Lustig's masterpiece a year ago when I was seeking some sort of shelter in the Synagogue library to process the very live memories of October 7, which had taken place at Shemini Atzeret the year before. I found the essence of the meaning of Sukkot in the novel's fleeting conversation between two lovers, aged 17 and 18, on their first and last night together, which captured so much with the sparest of words.

She looked up. She answered the same way: 'Darling. The word embraced everything. The three or four thousand years we had in our blood. The past few hours we had granted ourselves before our journey. For what would come after us.'

Love and hope can be found in the darkest of places is the message of Lustig's timeless tale. Helpful perhaps, if you will be reading this as the nights draw closer and our memories of Kristallnacht and all that followed are relived. But there's hope for more light one month away, when the candles can be lit for Chanukah, heralding that festival celebrating a miracle and rededication.

The memory of Sukkot may be fading along with its message of joy. But perhaps the words of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), read during the last days of Sukkot, with its message to focus on the smallest moments of delight

in the here and now, given the transience of life, are to be found in *Waiting for Leah*.

Leah turned the key in the lock. She picked up the cases and handed me the ace and queen of hearts. She looked like she might dissolve in a moment. On her half-open lips was a smile, and in her eyes, as when I'd first seen her, was an eagerness I was unable to explain. At the same time they declared that all was vanity.

Waiting for Leah sits at one end of the middle bookshelf of the Fiction section in our library, while at the other end another equally provocative title commands to be read: *Bring Us the Old People*. Through the narrator Maime's German-Polish stilted English, we enter her memory-infused daily life at an old people's home where what happened before she went into hiding decades earlier permeates her trust for those who love and care for her today. In contrast to *Waiting for Leah*, Marisa Kantor Stark's haunting tale of intimate episodic rememberings, from pre-war to occupied Central Europe, has the troubled triumph of survival tinged with moments of great tenderness. Maime's memory continues to bear witness, linking the present with the past, and that is reflected in the way this book won't let you put it down. Her struggle to come to terms with the stark command in the title will resonate with the generations born since the last war, who may seek to forget rather than to carry the choices their families were forced to make.

The narrator who heeded the command in the title is now herself elderly, offering the reader a reminder of why so many in our Belsize community will insist on their independent survival, even when cared for by those who love them most. Forgetfulness runs through this book, but it is not to be confused with forgetting. In the Shemini Atzeret service, heralding the end of Sukkot and the start of Simchat Torah, we had Yizkor, a memorial for the departed. In *Waiting for Leah* and *Bring us the Old People*, our narrators speak of real events that are as live today as though they were just last night.

As told to James Rossiter

ARNOŠT LUSTIG WAITING FOR LEAH

K/L 84

HARVILL



Our regular report from our Board of Deputies representatives **Deborah Cohen, Peter Strauss** and **Dilys Tausz**

We write this piece in the wake of the appalling attack at the Heaton Park Hebrew Congregation in Manchester on Yom Kippur. Our hearts go out to all the bereaved,

those who were injured and those who have suffered trauma.

The President of the Board of Deputies, Phil Rosenberg, made a solidarity visit to the Manchester congregation and related how he had mourned, prayed, sung and danced together with the members. In his speech at the 7 October Commemorative Event at Trafalgar Square, the President emphasised that our response to antisemitism must be to demonstrate Jewish joy

and Jewish pride. He reminded us that it is important that we are not silenced in the face of such tragedy and that we should live proudly as British Jews. We must not be cowed. Resilience is in our DNA and we will come through these difficult times even stronger than before, just as we did when we were expelled from England in the thirteenth century, suffered from the pogroms in Eastern Europe and faced annihilation as a result of the Holocaust.

FIRST PERSON

I was in Tel Aviv when the hostages were released

Elaine Bernstein's wonderful account of her experience of the return of the hostages reached us just before we went to press

What a week it was! After Rosh Hashanah I'd had an urge to go to Tel Aviv and I managed to book a flight for 9 October. And then came Yom Kippur with the Manchester shul attack, with its deaths and injuries – and the silence of many of my non-Jewish colleagues. I couldn't wait to get to Israel. The ceasefire had been announced before my departure so I knew I was coming to Israel at what might be a very happy time. I had no idea!

Arriving late on the Thursday night, my friends told me that they'd keep me posted as to what might be going on at Hostages Square. So on Saturday night I walked towards the square outside the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and found myself carried along by the throng of people. Being little and alone, I managed to shimmy my way to the point where chutzpah would have had to take over. I trod on a young man's foot, said 'selicha' – and he answered in perfect English, 'It's OK.' His father, originally from Stanmore, had made aliya 26 years ago and became my simultaneous translator for the night. Events were about to start and we were so near to the stage that he told us a joke, 'How many sound engineers does it take to do a sound check? One two, one two!' The mood was one of anticipatory joy. Coming from the negative mood of England, I felt it was premature and yet, if the Israelis were happy, who was I not to share their mood? The crowd kept shouting, 'Sank you

Trrrrump, sank you Veetkoff!' and it was adorable. I was there when Witkoff tried to thank Netanyahu and I booed with all my might. It was like we were naughty schoolchildren being allowed to boo our most unpopular schoolteacher, knowing that we wouldn't get into trouble as we were in the presence of our favourite one.

The hostages' parents, who for two years had held up banners of their kidnapped children and had spoken about the urgency for a deal, held the same banners and now thanked everyone for their continuous support, spoke of their hope that something new might arise – unity and peace – and that we must not stop until all the hostages, whether alive or no longer alive, were home.

On the Monday morning, when the hostages were due to return, I woke at 5am, contemplated walking to Hostages Square, and fell back to sleep. Waking three hours later I turned on the TV and I was torn between being glued to it, or turning it off and getting to the square again. I chose life and got an e-bike for speed. This time the mood was carnival-like. And, oh my goodness, it was a morning I'll treasure for as long as I live.

There was a giant screen on the main road just before the square. People were sitting or standing on the wide pavement, so I chose my spot and watched. Each time one of the hostages appeared on the screen, either just before their release, like Elkana Bohbot, answering his family's chaotic questions with a smile and 'hakol beseder', or coming out of a Red Cross van, smiling, like Alon Ohel, everyone just cheered, put their hands to their faces in wonder, clapped and wiped away tears of joy combined with two years of pain. It was as close as I'll ever get to witnessing people who have died come back to life. The mood there was more than joy, it was love. Love for the hostages, love for the families and love for the people of Israel.

After hearing the announcement that all the living hostages were now in Israel, I felt my work was done and I made my way to the beach. About an hour on, the lifeguard made a loudspeaker announcement. 'Everyone look up!' I reckoned he said. We did and one by one the helicopters flew over the beach taking the freed sons of Israel to the hospitals. We all waved and cheered at each one. It felt like our sons were coming home.



LOCAL HISTORY

Alight here for Finchleystrasse!

Etan Smallman on the street that saved a vanished world – and his family

It sounds almost too good to be true – London bus conductors responding to the influx of German-speaking refugees to the Finchley Road area by calling out ‘Next stop Finchleystrasse’ as they drew up to NW3.



Etan Smallman speaking at JW3

I was naturally sceptical about what seemed like an urban myth – but it turns out to have been rooted in reality. I eventually discovered this in an April 1940 issue of the *New Yorker* magazine, in which its London correspondent reported on the fears about fifth columnists in Britain, in part because of ‘the really surprising amount of German which one still hears spoken in London, especially in West Hampstead, where bus conductors enjoy tinkling their bells and bawling: “Alight here for FinchleyStrasse!”’ It was also confirmed by an audience member at a talk I gave at JW3 this summer – she recalled hearing it in the late 1950s. ‘What always amused me was the pronunciation,’ she said, ‘... strasse pronounced in that terribly English way.’

I am a freelance journalist and have been researching Finchleystrasse because it is the street that not only resurrected a vanished world – of continental cafés, restaurants, bookshops, cabarets and, of course, synagogues – but it is the street that gave my family a second chance. It is where both my maternal grandparents, Ilse and Suesskind (Sigi) Balsam, found refuge after fleeing Germany in 1939 and where they

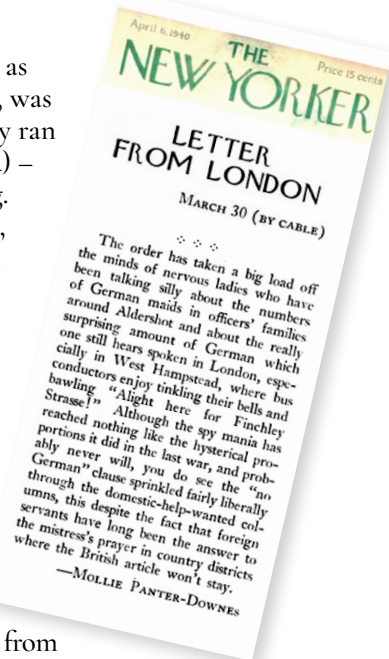


Etan Smallman's grandfather, 'Sigi' Balsam, outside his Finchley Road restaurant in the late 1940s

found each other, as well as where my mother, Susan, was born. It is also where they ran Café Balsam (at no. 169A) – offering ‘Soup, Joint, Veg. and Sweet’ for 2 shillings, ‘well known Continental atmosphere’ included.

When they moved their restaurant to Mayfair at the turn of the 1950s, the premises became the far more enduring Dorice.

I am researching a book on the subject and am keen to hear from anyone with memories of the Finchleystrasse scene, particularly anyone from the ‘first generation’. I would love to receive any memories and photos of Ackerman's, the Blue Danube club, the Burlington restaurant, Café Balsam, Cosmo, Dorice, John Barnes, the Laternndl theatre in Eton Avenue, Libris books, Mattessons meats and the various other shops, opticians, chiropodists, dentists, tailors etc. that were in the Finchley Road / Swiss Cottage area. Please email me at: finchleystrasse@gmail.com.



Extract from *The New Yorker* 6 April 1940 ‘The order’ refers to stricter regulations on the movements and activities of some foreign nationals

CHANUKAH MARKET

Come and enjoy delicious food, musical entertainment and retail therapy!

SUNDAY 7 DECEMBER 12.00-4.00PM

- Cosmetics
- Speciality Groceries
- Chanukah Gifts
- Wrapping Paper
- Cheder Stall
- Homeware
- Toys & Games
- Raffle with great prizes

• and much, much more!

DON'T MISS OUT!

51 BELSIZE SQUARE, LONDON, NW3 4HX



NEW SYNAGOGUE ARTWORK

The Beit Mitzvah mural

Caroline Loison, Belsize Square's Head of Cheder and Youth, describes a new Beit Mitzvah initiative – and a new decoration for our building

This year, the 2024-5 Beit Mitzvah class embarked on a very special and creative project – designing and painting their own mural, inspired by the much-loved artwork at JW3.

JW3's giant nine-storey-high mural was painted by Leon Fenster, who was commissioned to create a vibrant piece reflecting the diversity, creativity and energy of the Jewish community. His mural is a visual celebration of Jewish life, culture and tradition, transforming a plain outside wall at JW3 into a bright and colourful focal point for visitors.

In the spirit of this community art initiative, the Beit Mitzvah class decided to create their own version within the synagogue building. After negotiating a space on the wall in the corridor leading to the Synagogue Hall and with the help of Jesse Brown, Belsize Square member and professional artist, the pupils worked together to design and paint their own mural. Jesse guided the students through the process, helping them to translate their ideas into meaningful visual expressions, and assisting with a title and some additions of his own choosing.

For the artwork itself, the pupils used vibrant Posca paint markers. This allowed them to add fine detail and bold colour to their designs. Individual or small groups



of students contributed images that represented a place, object or idea that they felt was significant to their Jewish faith and identity. From Shabbat candles to Amy Winehouse, culinary traditions to Jewish symbols, the mural is a delightful patchwork of personal Jewish values.

One striking example came from Joseph, Olive and Sophie, who chose to reimagine the Tottenham Hotspur Football Club logo. They explained:

‘Spurs is well-known for being a ‘Jewish club’ ... At the bottom of the badge, instead of a cockerel standing on a football, we chose to paint it standing on the Star of David, the main symbol of Judaism.’

Ben also chose Spurs as his inspiration, adding: ‘I chose to paint the Tottenham logo because the Tottenham area is where lots of Jewish people live.’

Another heartfelt contribution came from Celeste, who drew inspiration from Jewish food and family traditions:

‘I decided to do a drawing of Roni's bagels and pastries because I am really proud of my Jewish faith and the food that we eat. I also love to cook Jewish recipes that my grandma passed down to me. ... Eating at Ronis reminds me of my grandma's cooking.’

Together, these contributions show how Jewish identity is experienced and expressed in many different ways – through community, sport, food, family, faith and memory.

The finished piece is not just a decorative addition to the synagogue but a meaningful expression of the next generation's connection to their heritage. Much like the JW3 mural, it celebrates the richness of Jewish life, seen through the eyes of our Belsize young people preparing to step into Jewish adulthood. Next time you are at our Synagogue, please make sure to visit the mural and see it in real life. It really is a wonderful sight and we are very proud of this Beit Mitzvah cohort's creation.



The stranger within and without

Sue Schraer reflects on *chesed* and Helen Grunberg's legacy

I have often pondered why I feel so comfortable in 'the Refugees' Synagogue' of Belsize Square, given my own different background. I believe it's because the ripples of the catastrophic atrocities of the Nazi regime touched many other lives. There are wider interpretations of *refugee* and *outsider*.

My own experience of being an outsider in the Jewish world was growing up halachically Jewish, feeling a kind of Jungian collective unconscious that was deep and powerful, but having had no Jewish education.

I was born and raised in a very small family in rural Hertfordshire, 'the only Jews in the village'. I was much more familiar with Christian hymns and the Lord's Prayer from school than the *Shema*. The rhythm of my year was marked at school by Christmas, Lent and Easter. *Chagim* came and went, unknown to me.

My family did not feel totally safe to disclose our identity to our neighbours and I was taught very little about it. The feeling of being Jewish was more subtly transmitted: my mother's culinary concoctions, learned from her Lithuanian grandmother, and sometimes served up to my astonished non-Jewish friends (cold fried fish, chopped liver, latkes, fish balls); my mother's occasional accounts of her Jewish childhood, which sounded so unfamiliar and exotic to my country-girl ears; and the Yiddish words sometimes peppering her conversation. The power of stories, smells, tastes and memories motivated me to discover more once I grew up.

There was one wounding experience when I was a university student in London, trying to find ways to make links and connections to my Judaism. I was turned away from a shul on the first day of Rosh

Hashanah because I did not know I needed a ticket to be admitted to High Holyday services. Now – especially in the light of very recent tragic events – I totally understand the need for vigilance. It was, nevertheless, a significant humiliation, disappointment and act of rejection, leaving me feeling foolish, ignorant and even more on the outside.

On the flip-side, my journey was greatly enhanced by the warm hands of welcome that were extended, including, from an elderly Jewish gentleman I met at a creative writing class in Swiss Cottage, who introduced me to his nephew, Mike, who became my Jewishly-learned husband!

To return to the ripples. My own father served in the brutal campaigns in Burma and would today have been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He remained restless and untethered throughout his life, and also continued to suffer malaria attacks.

The ripples that affected my mother came from staying behind as a young woman to be with her widowed mother during the Blitz, instead of enlisting in the forces. She was conscripted to a munitions factory in South London where she contracted TB, which consumed her 20s, her youth and her lungs. She was told she would not live beyond thirty. Fortunately, streptomycin was discovered in time and she went on to live to 87!

A central tenet of Judaism is the imperative to welcome the stranger. This resonates with the experiences of the Jewish people throughout history and is encapsulated in 'You shall not wrong nor oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (Exodus 22:20).

This commandment to treat the stranger with care and

compassion is repeated 36 times in the Torah. In Gematria, the system in which Hebrew letters correspond to numbers, 36 is twice the value of the word for life, *chai*, suggesting that prioritizing this commandment is the path to abundant life. There is a Talmudic idea that there exist thirty-six righteous people in each generation, the *tzadikim nistarim*, anonymously sustaining the world with virtuous acts.

Few embodied welcoming the stranger more than Helen Grunberg z"l. If not one of the 36 in the world, she was certainly one of the 36 at Belsize. Alongside her countless quiet contributions, she had a capacity to identify, and reach out to, the newcomer to the shul, the person who might hug the perimeter of the kiddush room, not quite knowing their place.



Helen Grunberg

Can we open the gates and our arms and let people into these gatherings; introduce them to others; extend the hand of welcome; can we try to notice them more, as Helen did? *Chesed* – kindness – can be essential in determining whether or not someone goes forward with their Jewish journey, as a 'Jew by choice' or perhaps reconnecting after a long absence.

It was moving to witness a large group of 'Jews by choice' who had been welcomed and taught by Rabbi Botnick and who had then appeared before the Beth Din, being blessed by him on Rosh Hashanah and welcomed openly and wholeheartedly to our safe haven.

As the year starts, let's continue Helen Grunberg's legacy of a heightened awareness of *chesed* and welcoming the stranger in our midst.

BAT MITZVAH PROJECT

The bridges that connect us

Evie Kashi explains the link between her parsha and her Bat Mitzvah project

The parsha *Ki Tetzei* (Deuteronomy 21:10–25:19) is packed with different rules about fairness and kindness, especially when it comes to workers and people who are struggling.

It includes rules like not taking advantage of workers no matter who they are, paying them on time, and never taking something important from a poor person just because they owe you money. The Torah repeats something really important several times in this portion: 'Remember, you were slaves in Egypt.' It's like God is saying, 'You've experienced what it's like to struggle. So make sure you help others who are struggling now.'

But while I was studying my portion, I had a question: what happens if someone *doesn't* follow these rules? How can a society work if the only thing stopping people from being unfair or unkind is *hoping* they choose to be nice?

The Talmud talks a lot about the idea of *tzedakah*, or charity, but it's not just about giving money. It's about showing compassion, treating people with dignity, visiting the sick, helping those in need, and standing up for those who need help. Maybe instead of punishments, Judaism focuses more on teaching us to do the right thing because it's the *right thing to do*, not because we're scared of getting into trouble.

This made me think about how I learn best in school. Some teachers are all about the rules and punishments, and others encourage you and believe in you. For me, encouragement works much better. When someone believes in me, I actually *want* to do better. I think

God wanted the Israelites to learn to care about others. When we show kindness to God's creatures, we create ripples of goodness that come back to us as a blessing.

For my Bat Mitzvah project, I wanted to put those values into action.

EVIE'S MUM SANDRA KASHI EXPLAINS:

Searching for a meaningful way to mark Evie's Bat Mitzvah, we came across Jewish Child's Day, who raise funds for youngsters who face challenges, and the charity resonated with Evie. Through their Bnei Mitzvah Twinning Programme, Evie struck up a pen-pal friendship with Noa, a lovely girl of the same age in southern Israel. They share many things in common.

Evie wanted to include the number 12 somehow in her fundraising, given that both she and Noa were that age. She considered a lot of sponsorship ideas but finally settled on a 12 Bridge, 12 mile walk across London in one day. We started by calculating the route from Albert Bridge in west London, aiming to walk across each bridge once and use the scenic river paths as much as possible in between. The walk culminated at Tower Bridge, landing her south-side for a final short walk to the tube station.

Evie was incredibly proud of herself for completing the walk (11.59 miles in 3 hours 39 minutes).



Evie at the end of her twelve mile, twelve bridges walk for Jewish Child's Day

She had a rucksack of snacks, bouncy new trainers for the occasion, took a few pitstops when her legs started to wobble, admired the sights as she went along, drew a few curious glances as she unveiled her bridge markers, moaned a little (OK, a lot!) but she absolutely knew she had to complete the whole route. Her motivation kept her going and the huge grin of relief as she took her final steps across Tower Bridge was proof of her achievement.

Her Bat Mitzvah journey, and particularly her fundraising project, has helped Evie to appreciate differences and challenges that others face. And also that she can make a difference, however big or small.

EVIE CONCLUDES:

Coming to the end of my Bat Mitzvah journey, I've realised that being Jewish isn't just about following rules. It's about actually living Jewish values every day: being kind, being fair and helping others whenever you can. For me, that's really what growing up and becoming a Jewish adult is all about.

OUR NEW SUKKAH

Cantor Paul Heller appreciates the special new addition to our shul

The building of a sukkah – that temporary, leafy shelter we create for the festival of Sukkot – is so much more than putting up a few walls and branches. It's an act of faith, a link to our shared history, and a way of bringing the community together in joy and reflection.

Since its inception, the Rabbi has taken a hands-on approach, from helping plan and construct the sukkah and ... sewing together the weather cover for the roof himself, to guiding discussions about what it represents: protection, gratitude, and the fragile beauty of life. His energy and enthusiasm have inspired everyone to take part, from cheder students decorating the walls to adults joining in the preparations.



Rabbi Botnick – hands-on sukkah builder



The sukkah – ready for action

Once the sukkah stands ready, it becomes a lively hub for festival life. This year, we've hosted festive meals for families in the Beit Mitzvah programme, and another for young adults: evenings filled with

good food, music, conversation and that special feeling of togetherness under the stars. Through these efforts, our sukkah has become more than a mitzvah – it's a living expression of community and continuity, where every person feels welcome.

Our thanks go to Rabbi Botnick for his ongoing dedication, his thoughtful guidance, and for ensuring that our sukkah each year will not only be halachically sound, but also spiritually vibrant and inclusive.

REMEMBERING

Florence Benaiah

Sue Mariner fondly remembers our former secretary



Florence at her retirement party in 1991

It was with great sadness that we said farewell to Florence Benaiah, who died on 25 September. From 1966 she had faithfully served the synagogue office for 25 years. She initially shadowed the congregation's first secretary, Nelly Baer, and later succeeded her in the role.

Florence was an observant Sephardi Jew who came from Calcutta, although her roots were in Baghdad. She immigrated to the UK when she was in her early 20s. She was immensely proud of her heritage and culture and was an active member in her own synagogue, Ohel David. Married to her beloved Charles, she was devoted to her two children, Maudy and Sally (now Goodman).

Florence integrated herself effortlessly into the life of the congregation. She came to know everyone and everything about Belsize Square and often engaged members to help to solve problems. It wasn't unusual to find her lending a hand in the kitchen at the Chanukah Bazaar. Although coming from a very different culture, she understood the community and approached everyone with warmth, patience and sympathy.

Florence shared a wonderful working relationship with Rabbi Kokotek. After his sudden death in 1981, Rabbi Rodney Mariner's entry to the Synagogue was made all the easier by her good advice and practical help. She warned him of any pitfalls and she was a sounding board for new ideas. He was always grateful for her wise counsel. They worked happily together for eight years until Florence's retirement.

In her last years, Florence became increasingly unwell and she passed away at the age of 94. She will be remembered as a loving, generous, thoughtful and warm person, who had huge affection for the community and its members, to whom she gave 25 years of devoted service. May her memory be a blessing.

NEWS FROM ABERNEIN MANSIONS NW.3.

Dear Fellow Members

Now that the heavier high holydays are deeply in the posteria, we here in Abernein Mansions are looking forward to the lighter celebration of Chanukah. Und, off cause, the Belisize Chanukah Markit. I have to converse that I still very much miss the old bizarre with the restaurant in the New Hall und going backwards to the very early days wear we still hat frankfurters und potato salad. But of cause it was quiet rite that we did ewentually become holy milchisch.

My wife, Mrs Klopstick, in reparation for Chanukah has mate some kendals. She wanted them to smell from Gluhwein to give the aeroma of the season, but the first etempt came out more with the scent of glue, without the vine. Her necks betch was better, only she forgot to put the wig in before the wacks set. Sankfully, there was no time for a sird occasion, as she hat to go to her glass-blowing class.

Befourhandt she hat a bit of an incident outside the Mansions. She was just about to jog on her way, when a boy in a hootie on an electrified bicycle snatched her glass-blowing goggles case from her hand. The boy must have sort it was a mobile fone. Of cause, my wife woodent leave it und shaced after him. Becourse he had taken it from her back side, she had not seen him properly. Instead of affronting the boy on the bike, by mistake she stopped an old lady on a mobility scooter und demanded she handt over her property. The women immediately gave my wife her fone. Sankfully, the police were very understandable und Mrs K was relieved from custardy after only a phew hours.

Very soon we will be entering the knew year. I hope that two southend und twentsix will bring piece und prosparety to all. At this moment from riding everything is still up in the hair. Althrough the prospectus is not looking overtly promising, I always like to sink positive as in the old editch 'Hope sprinkles infernal in the human beast'.

With the best of intentions
Fritz Klopstick

ASK FRITZ

Resently, my male box has been overfloated with the same question. How do we keep our hats over the water with the cost of living consistently arising? There is a very symbol resolution, live within your mains by making a budgie und sticking inside it. I remember hardter times when we only hat a ratio book to bye foot.

WE NEED YOUR HELP TO SHAPE THE FUTURE OF OUR SYNAGOGUE



If you said yes to any of the above, please join us on one of the dates below for an interactive session at the Synagogue. All members are invited to attend any of the three sessions, whether you're aged 16 or 116, and whether you've been a member for 50 days or 50 years. We will be having facilitated discussions to uncover the core values and beliefs that underpin our uniqueness. While we might have different ideas about specific topics, there are still fundamental notions that unite us.

This is the start of the 'Belsize of the Future' initiative to envision our Synagogue in 2040, and then to harness our collective resources and creativity to take us there.

Do you believe that Belsize Square Synagogue has anything special that makes it worth sustaining and nurturing for future generations?

Do you think communities have a significant role to play in the 21st century?

Do you believe that Judaism is still relevant in today's world?

Thursday 20 November – 19.30 to 21.00
Sunday 30 November – 09.30 to 11.00
(a session for children will run in parallel)
Tuesday 16 December – 19.30 to 21.00

Please let the office know ahead of time which session you will attend – this will help us to plan refreshments. But if you can't inform the office, don't worry, come along anyway!

SERVICES

Friday evenings at 6.45pm

Saturday mornings at 10.00am

Kikar Kids – Junior Shabbat Service

Saturday 6 December, 3 January

11.00am in the crèche for under 5s Service

11.00am in the library for 5-9-year-olds

11.30am Kids Kiddush

Contact Richard on rgpollins@gmail.com
for more information

CHEDER AND BEIT MITZVAH

Sunday mornings 9.30am–12.30pm

Enquiries to Head: Caroline Loison

caroline@synagogue.org.uk

End of Term Sunday 14 December

ADULT DISCUSSION GROUP

Meetings take place on Sunday mornings in term-time.

Programme will be in the News from the Square emails
every Thursday.

For further information, please contact Claire Walford
claire.walford@yahoo.com.

COMMUNITY NEWS

NEW MEMBERS

We extend a cordial welcome to:

Jonathan Galore & Roni Garvish with children Yoni,
Daniel & Amalia | Lauren & Christopher Stone with
children Mariana, Charlotte & Henry | Vivien Bejerano
James Musil-Popper | Philip Glyn & Danielle Ashton with
children Isabella & Charlie | Ricardo Dos Santos | David
Caine | Saul Robinson | Mia Brent | Maya & Kevin Meyer
with daughter Emily | Abigail & Jonathan Levy | Hazel &
Adam Avigdori with children Jack, Leo & Eli | Ari Weiler-
Ofek | Abigail Welsh | Nicole Cohen | Gideon Hoffman
with son Benjamin | Eileen Cheung & Jack Menashy

BIRTHS

Mazal tov to Carrie Garfinkel & Jack Prevezer
on the birth of their son Leo

Mazal tov to Sasha & Jeremy Maisel
on the birth of their daughter Esti

Mazal tov to Eileen Cheung & Jack Menashy
on the birth of their son Zachary

BNEI MITZVAH

Mazal Tov to Emily Ross & Tom Joannou on the Bat
Mitzvah of their daughter Olive on Saturday 1 November

Mazal Tov to Alex Reitman & Jesse Brown on the Bar
Mitzvah of their son Jacob on Saturday 8 November

Mazal Tov to Ellie Horwell & Simon Roche on the Bar
Mitzvah of their son Benjy on Saturday 15 November

Mazal Tov to Sara Beazley & Noam Givon on the Bar
Mitzvah of their son Leo on Saturday 22 November

Mazal Tov to Sarah Walford & Naci Uydac on the
Bat Mitzvah of their daughter Melissa on
Saturday 29 November

SYNAGOGUE HELP LINES

BELSIZE SQUARE SYNAGOGUE

51 Belsize Square,
London NW3 4HX

020 7794 3949

office@synagogue.org.uk

www.synagogue.org.uk

SYNAGOGUE OFFICE HOURS

Mon–Thu: 9.00am–5.30pm

Friday: 9.00am–2.00pm

SYNAGOGUE LIBRARY

Open to members during
office hours

RABBI

Rabbi Gabriel Botnick

rabbi@synagogue.org.uk

To book an in-person,
video or telephone
appointment with Rabbi
Botnick, please email his
PA Claire Austin:
claire@synagogue.org.uk

CANTOR

Dr Paul Heller

cantor@synagogue.org.uk

07949 078366

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Lee Taylor

lee@synagogue.org.uk

CHAIRS

Annette Nathan and

Jimmy Strauss

chairman@

synagogue.org.uk

CHEDER AND YOUTH

Caroline Loison

caroline@

synagogue.org.uk

020 7794 3949

COMMUNITY CARE CO-ORDINATOR & BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT SERVICE

Eve Hersov

eve@synagogue.org.uk

07944 574676

FUNERALS

During Synagogue office
hours phone Synagogue

Evenings/weekends phone
Calo's (Undertakers)

020 8958 2112

OUR CONGREGATION

Editor: Alex Antscherl

Associate Editor:

David Horwell

Copy date for the
January/February issue is
12 December

Contributions to
alexantscherl@me.com or
the Synagogue office

Mazal Tov to Julie & Jonathan Livingstone on the
Bat Mitzvah of their daughter Celeste on
Saturday 13 December

DEATHS

We regret to announce the passing of

Joel Finler on 2 August

Helen Grunberg on 25 September

Kevin Hilton on 27 September



BOOK BINDING



Your precious books restored

Contact Dolly on

020 8902 0774