



## Kol HaKehilah

The Kol Nefesh Masorti Synagogue Magazine

Pesach 5785/2025

*What We Harvest*

*In this issue:*

Writing by Rabbi Joel, Chazan Jacky, Georgia Kaufmann, Shibby Allen, Alison Niman, Ruth Hart, Mike Fenster, Gay Teper, Daniel Preter, Jeremy Kelly, Ilan Driver, Eli Morris, Esther Shouby, Nahum Gordon, and many others.

Cover art by Rena Pearl.

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If you’d like to be involved in the production of the next issue – or if you’d like to suggest a theme – please let us know! The next edition will be Rosh HaShanah 5786/2025.

The views expressed in this magazine are not necessarily those of KNM.



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# Kol HaKehilah

Pesach 5785/2025



## What We Harvest



# What We Harvest

By Rabbi Joel Levy

I want to think a little about the “we” in “what we harvest”. The contemporary West is possibly the society most profoundly oriented towards the individual in the long history of our species. Can we think about what we harvest or produce as a product of communal rather than individual effort?

The harvest festival in English churches is traditionally celebrated on the Sunday nearest the harvest moon; the full Moon that occurs closest to the autumn equinox on 21st September. It is interesting that a successful end to the harvest is still celebrated across the UK as a communal event rather than an event just for farmers. An old friend of mine who is a vicar in the church of England assures me that this tradition is still going strong. Maybe this harks back to a time before full industrialisation when everyone was involved in the harvest. Even when I was a child there was a time during the harvest season when it was all hands on deck in our village, and students rather than foreign workers would routinely do seasonal agricultural work. Maybe the harvest festival also reflects a deep understanding that, despite urbanisation and despite the

import of much of our food, we all have skin in the game when it comes to growing the food that we eat.

Judaism, confusingly for Jews in the diaspora, marks the agricultural cycle according to the timing of the harvests in Israel. This requires a degree of dis- and re-orientation for those living outside Israel. In the UK, as I said, the harvest festival occurs as the summer is drawing to a close. In the Middle East the summer is the agricultural down time, as it is so hot that very little grows. The real growing season begins once the autumnal rains first kick in, and the harvest season begins with the barley harvest in the spring at Pesach time and ends with the wheat harvest at Shavuot. The question of “what we harvest” underpinning this edition of Kol HaKehilah will depend largely on who that “we” refers to! The framing of the question in the plural (“what we harvest”, not “what I harvest”) points to the same intrinsically irreducible communality that is reflected in the persistence of harvest festivals in the UK that I mentioned above.

I would like to dig into and expand upon this communitarian way of thinking in Judaism by looking at the way that early Jewish sources think about the shared elements of agricultural life. Much of this discussion falls in the realm of what the mishnah calls “commandments which are dependent on the land”. There is a whole plethora of Jewish religious obligations which are only operative once we are living, working and farming in our indigenous homeland.

### משנה קידושין א:ט

כל מצוה שהיא תלויה בארץ אינה נוהגת אלא בארץ. ושאין תלויה בארץ נוהגת בין בארץ בין בחוצה לארץ, חוץ מן הערלה וכלאים. רבי אליעזר אומר, אף מן הקדוש

### Mishnah Kiddushin 1:9

Every commandment which is dependent on the land is practised only in the land (of Israel); and every commandment which is not depend-

ent on the land is practised both in and outside the land, except *orlah* (not eating fruits for the first three years after planting a tree) and *kilayim* (not planting wheat in a vineyard). Rabbi Eliezer says: also [the prohibition of eating] the new [grain harvest until after the omer sacrifice].

Here are, very briefly, five ways in which our traditions conceptualised and articulated some of the irreducibly communitarian aspects of agricultural life – the “we” in “what we harvest”!

### 1. “Now it shall be: if you (pl) hearken” (Deuteronomy 11:13, the second paragraph of the Shema).

The rain falls on us all together, and in Israel, unlike in Egypt where the Nile is the main source of water, this rainfall is what determines the fecundity of the land. In the second paragraph of the Shema we recite that we will be judged as a people, not as individuals, regarding rainfall; but we will each be rewarded as we harvest our own crops.

### דברים יא:יג-טו

והלא אם שמע תשמעו אל מצותי אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם היום לאהבה אתי יהוה אלהיכם ולעבדו בקל לבבכם ובקל נפשכם:

ונתתי מטרארצכם בעתו יורה ומלקוש ואספת דגנך ותיירש ויצהרה:

ונתתי עשב בשדה לבקמתך ואכלת ושבעת:

### Deuteronomy 11:13–15

13. Now it shall be: if you (pl) hearken, yes, hearken to my commandments that I command you (pl) today, to love YHWH your (pl) God and to serve him with all your (pl) heart and with all your being:

14. I will give forth the rain of your (pl) land in its due-time, shooting-rain and later-rain; you (s) shall gather in your (s) grain, your (s) new-wine and your (s) shining-oil;

15. I will give forth herbage in your (s) field, for your (s) animals, and you (s) will eat and you (s) will be satisfied.

### 2. The worker in the vineyard (*hapoel ba-kerem*).

In Deuteronomy Chapter 23 verses 25-26 we hear that “When you come into the vineyard of your neighbour, you may eat grapes, according to your appetite, until you are satisfied, but you may not put any in your vessel. When you come into the standing-grain of your neighbour, you may pluck off ears with your hand, but a sickle you are not to swing over the grain of your neighbour.” The original meaning of these verses appears to imply a form of softening of the laws of property ownership to the extent that anyone could wander into a person’s vineyard or wheat-field and take small amounts of food for themselves to consume immediately. According to this text, the shift from a nomadic to a fixed agrarian way of life – which took place in what is referred to as the Neolithic Revolution at the end of the last Ice Age about 10,000 years ago – is not complete. Wanderers and hunter-gatherers can still wander over the land and eat a little as they pass. Similarly, in the Highlands of Scotland there are still wild camping rights in most places where you are permitted to sleep a night and move on. Property rights are not total.

The Talmud (Baba Metzia 87) interprets “but you may not put any in your vessel” as implying that a worker employed to harvest crops is permitted to eat as they go along. A worker who has been employed to help with the harvest also has a share in the crops, and the farmer has no right to prevent this.

### 3. The five agricultural gifts for the poor: *pe’ah*, *shich’cha*, *leket*, *peret* and *ol’lot*.

“It is a mitzvah for a person to include the poor in the blessing of his crop and he should leave for them fruits in the corner of his field – this is *pe’ah*. And if he forgets a little grain or fruit while he is harvesting or picking or gathering – he should leave it for the poor – and this is *shich’cha*. And if individual crops should fall during harvesting, which are the *leket* – or individual grapes when harvesting them, which are the *peret* – he should leave them for the poor. And he should also leave for the poor the *ol’lot*, which are the tiny bunches of grapes” (Peninei Halacha, Gifts to the Poor 1:3). Not only do these five agricultural “gifts” belong by right to the poor,

but the poor are constitutionally permitted to enter the property of the farmer to harvest them for themselves. The five agricultural gifts are harvested by the poor, not by the farmer, as their share in what we harvest. The owner is again encouraged to think of the harvest as a communal rather than a private affair.

4. *The shmitta cycle* (see Leviticus chapter 25). In the seventh year of every seven-year agricultural cycle the land lies fallow. Food that grows spontaneously during that year is considered *hefker* – ownerless – and it may be picked and consumed by anyone. Everyone in the land is in effect a hunter-gatherer during that year, and again there is a full right of entry to private property. Strictly, there is not to be a harvest during that year but the bounty of the land is shared by all – rich and poor, domesticated and wild animals alike (Leviticus 25:7). It is as if the land reverts to its underpinning ownership – the ownership of God – and we become aware that despite our pragmatic claims to ownership for the other six years of the cycle, we are really merely “sojourners and resident-dwellers” (Leviticus 25:23) relative to God.

5. *Terumot and tithes*. Please forgive a long quotation here. “Israel is commanded to set aside *terumot* and tithes from the grain and fruits they grow in the Land of Israel. The mitzvah includes four components: two *terumot* and two tithes... The *terumot* (donations) are holy and intended for the priests who need to eat them in a state of ritual purity. The ‘First tithe’ (i.e., 10%) is intended for the Levites and since it is not sacred it is permissible for them to eat it without restriction. The purpose of the additional tithe varies according to the year of the agricultural cycle. In years 1, 2, 4 and 5 it is called the ‘second tithe’ and it is brought up to Jerusalem and eaten in a state of ritual purity. In the third and sixth years it is given to the poor, then it is called the ‘poor tithe’, and since it is not sacred, it is permitted to eat it without restriction” (Peninei Halacha, Terumot and Tithes 7:1).

The net result of the tithing system is that around 22–23% of agricultural produce went to support the priesthood, the education sector, the poor and the finan-

cial centrality of Jerusalem. Interestingly, this number hovers around contemporary rates of income tax. In a largely agrarian society, everyone knew that a proportion of the proceeds of the harvest were to be used to sustain higher cultural pursuits.

To repeat what I said above, the contemporary West is possibly the society most profoundly oriented towards the rights of the individual in the long history of our species. It would be interesting to go through the five communitarian elements that I outlined above and see whether there are parallels to each in today’s Britain. In ancient Israel, which was of course exponentially poorer, the harvest was a reassuringly shared project. Despite, or perhaps because of, the greater fragility of life then, there was a deeper understanding of the shared nature of economic pursuits, and an appreciation that the truly scary stuff happens when social cohesion breaks down and life is no longer viewed as a shared project.

For our species, religion has always been the place where we humans gather to reaffirm our commitment to and re-encounter the “we”. Our peak times in synagogue are always the ones when we experience ourselves as mere parts of a horizontal community of space (the community of Israel spread over the globe) and a vertical community of time (the community of Israel spread over human history), and ultimately a timeless and spaceless communion with God. ■



*Our peak times in synagogue are those where we experience ourselves as mere parts of a community*

*There is an intrinsically irreducible communality reflected in the persistence of harvest festivals*





# The Gantse Megillah, or Vayehi Biymeit Brian

By Chazan Jacky Chernetz

Once upon a time...

Brian had a Cash and Carry warehouse in the East End of London. He employed an accountant – we'll call him Roy – a lovely man whose company we both enjoyed. This gentleman's father passed away in old age, and when clearing out their father's loft, Roy's family found a scroll, calligraphed in Hebrew. They remembered their father telling them he had been in the British Army in Jerusalem and he had brought the scroll home. The family believed it was a very valuable antiquity and thought they would get a lot of money for it. I won't say any more about that!

When Roy told me about it I asked him if he could bring it in and I would have a look. Of course it wasn't an antiquity (although it would be interesting to date it). It was in fact a Megillat Esther, which we read each year on Purim. I asked him if I could purchase it from his family as it belonged with the Jewish people and should be used. After much deliberation, the family agreed I could purchase it (!) which I did at quite a price in those days. I was pleased to rescue it.

I had a little cover made for it in memory of my late mother z"l and gave it to the shul to which we belonged, which was then Edgware Reform (this was 1979 or thereabouts). Each year on Purim it came out and was read.

When we started EMS, Rabbi Michael Leigh graciously brought the scroll to me so I had it each year for us to read. Eventually, I put it together with our Sifrei Torah at Kol Nefesh where it is today.

About a week before Purim this year, Jay told me that there were certain letters that had been effaced somewhat, rendering the scroll *pasul* (not kosher to read). So I went into various options for a *sofer* (scribe) to remedy the situation. Jay then told me that he had studied *sofrut* (Hebrew calligraphy) in Jerusalem and had the requisite ink and quills etc. He also said he could do it quickly, and so we would have it ready before Purim.

This lovely story throws up a number of issues and questions.

Where did the scroll originate? We can often tell from the style of the *sofer*. It may not have been written in Jerusalem, but could have been brought there by an immigrant.

How old is the scroll? Maybe a DNA test can tell, or it can be checked by an expert. My guess is that it is probably 19th century but could be older.

Why was it written on such thick parchment? Megillat Esther is meant to be read in the form of a letter – an *igeret* – the form taken by part of the story itself! This means opening the whole scroll out and folding it in the form of a letter, as would have been done in those days. This particular scroll makes it difficult,

because the skin it is written on is so thick that it springs back and needs to be held down!

Why did Roy's father "pillage" the scroll – or did he? This is an assumption that is easy to make, knowing the history of the British Mandate.

The history of our precious Hebrew scrolls is interesting. We read the Torah each week paying scant attention to the actual work involved in producing the scrolls – the *claff* (parchment) and its preparation, calligraphy, special ink and quills etc., style, accuracy (yes, there can be some mistakes!), stitching, the painstaking time involved, the *Atzei Chayim* (wooden rollers), dedications, and not least the origins and history of the physical scroll. As an aside, I would like to relate the story of a particular Sefer Torah which was read during a retreat I attended in upstate New York with the beloved Chazan Jack Kessler z"l. He removed the Sefer Torah from the Ark that Shabbat and told this story: There was a family in a town in Germany who owned a Sefer Torah. Knowing what was about to come they wrapped the Sefer Torah well, making sure to waterproof the container. They then buried it in their garden. Years later after the war a member of the family who survived returned, trying to remember where the scroll had been buried. To his surprise it was still there. This was the very scroll we were reading that morning!



Left: From Chapter 9 in our Megillah scroll, the long sentence naming the sons of Haman. This is traditionally read in one breath – expertly accomplished this year by Finn Driver.

Right: From Chapter 1 in our scroll, showing the letter shin in the word Sheva effaced (top) and repaired (bottom) by our own Jay Schlesinger.



## New Simcha Benchers Now Available!

For too long, the only simcha benchers available have been from Artscroll or the insert available via the Orthodox community. A few years ago, Masorti Judaism was given permission by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism to use its bencher, B'Kol Echad, to create the UK Masorti Bencher, but that has never been made available to purchase. The European Academy for Jewish Liturgy, founded by our own Chazan Jaclyn Chernetz, was also given permission to use B'Kol Echad, and we have used this as the basis to create our own 24-page simcha bencher that is available now for weddings and b'nai mitzvot, with either a generic or custom cover, from as little as £3/copy.

We are delighted to share that the first simcha to use our new bencher was the wedding of our own Harry Kelly to Katie Maguire in February. Harry and Katie created a bespoke cover for the bencher (designed by Beth Grover, Samuel Kelly's partner).

Beyond this, we are also working on a new Shabbat version of the bencher, including Kiddush for Shabbat and festivals, Havdalah, and Shabbat zemirot (songs), which will be available to purchase in September 2025.

For more information, please reach out to James Burns or Jay Schlesinger, or email [bencher@eajl.org](mailto:bencher@eajl.org).



The Memorial Scrolls Trust at Westminster Synagogue (where Harry Kelly and Katie just got married) houses rescued scrolls from Bohemia and Moravia. Many of these scrolls have been distributed to synagogues around the world, but those that are *pasul* have been kept as a memorial. They are like bodies.

Our little Megillah has been rescued again from *pasul* to kosher by Jay, who has done the requisite repair! ■

Right: *Pasul* scrolls rescued from Bohemia and Moravia, housed at the Memorial Scrolls Trust at Westminster Synagogue.



## What We Harvest

By Georgia Kaufmann

The agricultural year runs like a seamless thread through the Jewish calendar. We have four new years, all linked to the seasons and nature (trees, animals and subsequent harvests).

Sukkot closely following Rosh Hashanah marks the harvest at the end of the summer. The time for picking fruit and late summer crops. My sensibilities are attuned to the calendar being reset in the dead of winter or with the bursting vitality of spring; not at a time of decline and mellow fruitfulness. The ancient Egyptian year, however, started in September, the time for the annual Nile flood, the bringer of life to this otherwise desert community. The liberated slaves leaving Egypt may well have kept this sense of renewal at this time even after their Exodus.

The new year reflecting spring, the beginning of life, cultivation, growth, is commemorated at Pesach. At the seder we celebrate the birth of the Israelite nation, after the torpor or winter of Egyptian slavery. The seder plate displays eggs, (sacrificial) lamb bones, green leaves – the stuff of spring and rebirth. From the second day of Pesach we start counting the Omer leading to Shavuot, the early barley and wheat harvests spread over seven weeks. Shavuot is symbolically when we “harvested”, or were given, the Ten Commandments. In a way, the Torah is the first crop.

Harvesting for agricultural peoples implies planting seeds or bulbs earlier in the year. Tending the land and cultivating it for produce is sanctified in the Torah. We are commanded not to pick fruit from a tree in its first three years, to give the land respite (Shemithah years), to not strip it bare (leaving the edges for the poor, like Ruth, but also leaving seeds to nature). The needs of future generations are protected by good husbandry now. Good farming is compared to good behaviour.

Consider the following (taken from the

William Davidson Talmud, a digital version of the Koren–Steinsaltz Talmud. The literal translation is in bold; commentary and additions are in plain text).

### Sukkah 49b

§ **Rabbi Elazar said: One who performs acts of charity is greater than one who sacrifices all types of offerings, as it is stated: “To perform charity and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than an offering”** (Proverbs 21:3), including all types of offerings. **And Rabbi Elazar said: Acts of kindness, assisting someone in need, are greater than charity, as it is stated: “Sow to yourselves according to charity, and reap according to kindness”** (Hosea 10:12). This means: **If a person sows, it is uncertain whether he will eat or whether he will not eat**, since much can go wrong before the seed becomes food. However, **if a person reaps, he certainly eats**. In this verse, charity is likened to sowing, while acts of kindness are likened to reaping.

For many of us, we are so far removed from food production, that we have lost any sense of dependence on nature. Food comes from supermarkets in a steady inexhaustible stream. We have lost an understanding of consequence. Watching Trump flip and flap from one policy to another, it seems clear to me that he has no understanding of the basis for the political stability which he is destroying, he has no capacity to foresee the consequence of his greed.

He could have read the Tanakh.

### Job 4:8

As I have seen, those who plow evil  
And sow mischief reap them

The Christian proverb “we reap what we

sow” (Galatians 6:9) puts it most succinctly. If we sow good, we reap good; if we sow evil that is what we harvest. This understanding of consequence is true of most religions. Christianity sees the entry to heaven or hell as recompense for the accrual of sins or virtues we have lived by. Buddhism, in various forms, posits that our next life, after rebirth, will be an improvement or decline depending on how virtuous or not we are in this life. One way or another religions coax us, for our own benefit, to behave well to others. We reap what we sow. You put good into the world; it comes around.

And if we behave badly, that too comes around.

Nomenclature aside – just retribution, safe-keeping, ethnic cleansing, genocide – what pains me, apart from the human suffering, is the lack of wisdom in the Israeli government’s policy to wipe out Hamas. What I see is the seeds of future Israeli deaths being sown. All those children, boys and girls, who have seen their homes destroyed, the rubble where there were schools and hospitals, who are now living without electricity and running water, let alone food – this whole generation has had the seeds of hate planted in their hearts, and in time that hate will be harvested and returned to Israel.

Some 1200 Israelis were killed on October 7th, and in January 2025 the Gaza death toll was nearly 47,000.

### Proverbs 22:8

He who sows injustice shall reap  
misfortune;  
His rod of wrath shall fail.

It is one thing for God to stretch out his mighty hand; it is another for humanity to play God. I fear that Netanyahu’s rod of wrath will not just fail, not just continue killing, but ultimately it will lead to Israel’s demise. This will not be a good crop. ■



## Leaving the “Harvest Bloc”

By Shibby Allen

After the victory of the Six Day War in 1967, Israel gained control of the Gaza Strip from Egypt and built 17 towns and kibbutzim collectively known by the international community as settlements. Together they were called Gush Katif, which translates as “Harvest Bloc”. This apt name was given to the area stretching the coastline from the middle of the strip right to the border with Egypt, which had many greenhouses and grew a plethora of varieties of vegetables and flowers for export, among them cherry tomatoes, leafy plants and geraniums.



This summer will mark 20 years since the strip was made completely Judenfrei – by other Jews, uprooting more than 8,000 Jews who lived in both religious and non-religious fenced-off communities.

Although Gush Katif was built after 1967, Jewish history in Gaza can be traced back to Biblical times. The Patriarchs are described as living in Gerar; Samson is captured in Gaza; and then later it became part of the greater Hasmonean Kingdom. In 2000, the Second Intifada caused a wave of havoc and bloodshed throughout Israel. These acts of terrorism were finally and fatefully rewarded five years later with the expulsion of Jews from Gaza and autonomy promised to the Arab residents.

The forced evacuation led to a split in Israeli society. Some lined up to form a chain running from Gaza all the way to



the Kotel in Jerusalem in an act of solidarity. Other Gush Katif residents wore yellow Magen David stars on their clothes as they were forcibly evicted, creating outrage from certain quarters at the political act of wearing this badge. The evacuation was very uncomfortable to watch on television, as residents were literally dragged away from their homes whilst praying, with cries of “Yehudi Lo Migaresh Yehudi!” (“A Jew does not expel a Jew”). Everything was removed from the settlements, including the bodies of the deceased which were exhumed from cemeteries and reburied elsewhere for fear of retaliation. Unfortunately, as expected, once the 8,693 residents were removed, the Gazans destroyed all the remaining infrastructure, including the greenhouses which once made the coastal plain so bountiful, with the actual pipes used for the irrigation system repurposed to make rockets which were subsequently fired into Israel. Some Israelis prioritised an end to hostilities and saw creating a “greater Israel” as an obstacle to this, whilst others viewed the bloc as a necessary buffer between Israel and Palestinian aggression. A very divisive topic.

After the last town was evacuated and Israel finally called it a day in Gaza, mere months later, a civil war broke out in the Strip, leading to Hamas coming to power, something it still retains (as of March 2025). Since then there have now

been five wars to date, which have unfortunately garnered much support worldwide from terribly misguided individuals who believe they are supporting resistance. In conclusion, the evacuation was no less than a dismal failure, both for Israel and for the Arab population of Gaza, who have to live under Ha-

mas’s oppressive rule.

Ten years after this event a third of the old Gush Katif residents were still living in caravans and shacks. They refused to be housed permanently in the hope of returning home to the Harvest Bloc, although they have nearly all been resettled now.

Today we long for the return of the abducted and missing following the Oct 7th pogrom. We wait for them to come back home and think ahead to a new Gaza, how it could be governed, how to rebuild it and de-radicalise the next generation. Some Israelis have already assembled at the border, anxious to return to living in the strip permanently, proudly wearing the orange ribbons and flags that were once the symbol of opposition to the 2005 evacuation. Maybe they are hoping to make Gaza bloom again as it once did, and create a new harvest. I would say it would take a miracle to have peace there, but they would say “Israel runs on miracles!” ■



## What We Harvest

By Alison Niman

One of my favourite anecdotes is the tale of how once, at work, I was charged with the task of getting some legislation faxed over from the Falkland Islands. I was fortunate enough to get hold of a helpful official on the islands who kindly obliged with my query. When he took my details down (I am neé Million) he asked whether I was related to Ivor Million from Manchester, England. Ivor was, indeed, my late father.

It turned out that said official on the Falkland Islands had been articulated to my father some 20 years prior in his small, cramped office up a narrow dark staircase on Lapwing Lane in Withington. I remember that office well, not least for the smell of brown dictating tape and dusty files. No wonder said official had decided to put 8,000 miles between himself and the unwelcome wafts of Dickens-ia.

That is the greatest coincidence I have ever experienced.

We have to be careful when we speak of coincidences in Judaism. Who are we to say that occurrences are not the will of God? The Ba'al Shem Tov said: "By me, there is no such thing as coincidence! Every person should believe that everything comes by Divine Providence and he should not attribute it to coincidence, God forbid."

Perhaps that is something the American-British writer Bill Bryson should have borne in mind when he was commissioned to write an article on coincidences. He gave up on it and went for a walk, where he chanced upon a second-hand fair selling a book called "The Little Book of Coincidences". He bought it, went back home and wrote the article.

These anecdotes may be nothing to do with "what we harvest", but I enjoy relating them and I can certainly say that I experienced a Bill Bryson coincidental

moment (should the Baal Shem Tov permit me to think so) in preparing for this article. After thinking about what this latest theme for Kol HaKehilah meant to me I gave up preparing anything at all, not for lack of interest but for lack of experience. All harvesting meant to me was my childhood trips to the greengrocers in Withington to choose a little basket of fruit and vegetables to take to Harvest Festival at school. Apart from that I have never dirtied my hands on a farm or in fields, not even on kibbutz.

So, I gave up on Kol HaKehilah (sorry Meira, but it really wasn't for long) and opened up my latest book, which shamefully has been in the unread queue since my trip to Malta in 1992, called "The Kappillan of Malta" by Nicholas Monsarrat. I opened the book at the following: "Already the first harvest of the day was being offered to the hungry. On the scored, bloodied market tables, fish caught before dawn, or perhaps fish less innocent in death, lay in mountainous display, in a Mediterranean rainbow of blue and red and gold and gleaming silver."

Now that has to be a Bill Bryson moment if ever there was one! I had never thought of a fish harvest! Fish were certainly not in the little Harvest Festival baskets we took to school packed with fruit and vegetables from our green and pleasant English lands. Yet in Malta, rural land is scarcer. Fishable waters are certainly not. No wonder to the Maltese a harvest is not green but blue.

It may be stating the obvious to say that what we harvest depends on what our natural surroundings yield, and that these yields differ from land to land depending on the soil and climate. The French are sufficiently besotted with this idea to give it the name *le terroir*, to stress the importance of what each land – *la terre* – produces. Often for the French "le terroir" means wine, but the extent of the world's biodiversity means that in China it might be rice, in America it is maize, in Israel an abundance of fruit, in Greece olives, in Ukraine wheat, in Colombia coffee.

What we harvest reflects the immediate environment in which we live, and

should remind us that our world enjoys extensive variety in this respect. It should remind us too of the importance of sharing our local resources with our fellow human beings worldwide; the French cannot live on wine alone – a cup of coffee is needed to start the day! People of the world need to co-exist by sharing their lands' resources across borders and boundaries. The world may be vast, but we are one community. It's a small world, so they say.

Which reminds me – did I ever tell you of the time when my father's articulated clerk ended up helping me one afternoon at work, 20 years later and 8,000 miles away? ■

## A Purim Harvest

By Ruth Hart

The first impression I had of the theme of this issue was that we are at the wrong time of the year (unless you live in the southern hemisphere, if you'll excuse my Borealnornativity). We have two harvests in our calendar, one at Shavuot and one at Sukkot, and if you live anywhere but Israel, the first one is theoretical. In any case, the year-round availability of any fruits, first or last, makes both harvests theoretical unless you are making the effort to eat locally and seasonally, but I am not going to lecture you on that, because we could all end up living on potatoes and turnips through the winter and getting scurvy.

Purim, on the other hand, occurs before Pesach, so when we look at it that way, the upside-down quality makes sense. At present, the political situation does remind us of the one in ancient Persia, and every antisemitic regime since, but, unlike previous iterations of Amalek, the polarities have been reversed, so that we are considered to be the persecutors and our enemies the persecuted. Quite often, the allies of the persecutors will remind us that they are "good" people. Some of our own people have joined in, believing that

to defend ourselves is to copy the murderers, and defining themselves as "good" Jews in opposition to the "other" good Jews who believe that a good Jew endeavours to observe the mitzvot and to defend his or her fellow Jews.

How did we get here? The Torah and popular psychology both have a great deal to say about harvesting, both in the literal sense (see above) and in the metaphorical one. According to Bereshit, Adam and Eve made a choice and ended up having to work the land, in both senses reaping what they sowed. This appears to be a punishment, yet, in Devarim, the manna, which our ancestors were given without needing to work for it, dries up as they cross the border and they must work the land again. So this is no longer a punishment but an aspiration. For centuries, life was tough and not always fair, but individuals were responsible for their choices and knew the difference between a good and a bad one. Only within living memory, notions of good and evil have been overturned, so that advocates of promiscuity, deceit and terror can hide behind the shields of equity, kindness and liberation. Did the so-called counter-culture sow the seeds, not of tikun olam, but the selfishness and savagery of over-indulged children who never had to take responsibility for their deeds, while the less privileged, as ever, paid the price?

This was not the essay I started to write. There are pleasanter metaphors, both in our religious texts and modern Zionist thought, for growing a happy family and a good society. Shir ha-Ma'alot promises us that we may sow in tears and reap in joy, but our relativist society is confused about what is good soil and good seed, so it is hardly surprising that those of us who dissent get called all sorts of names or shut up altogether. Every day is Purim, everybody is drunk and our friends are not always what they seem. Some Jews have a difficulty with Purim because of the notion of retribution. God knows what they make of Pesach, with its casting off of shackles and the notion of self-respect, not just because God chose us but because we changed the way we lived and the way we thought of ourselves. ■

## Seeds of Hope

By Mike Fenster

A farmer sows seeds and hopes to harvest more than he sowed. That is how the world has worked for millennia. Seeds are about the future. Seeds have the power of generation, of creating something new, something mostly identical to what has gone before but with some variation, sometimes positive, sometimes negative. We hope that on balance the seeds we sow will lead to an improved crop; those seeds contain our hopes for the future.

Attending an inter-faith Iftar, the meal at the end of a day of fasting during Ramadan, the rabbi there spoke of seeds as hope; of how seeds have an almost supernatural ability to grow in the most inhospitable places, to extend new life to those dark or unwelcoming places. It spoke to me of how there often seems very little we can do today, when all around us the world is changing in ways which I couldn't have imagined 30 years ago. In 1995 it seemed to many of us that there was such a thing as progress. Oslo, the Berlin wall, Mandela. All signals of positive changes to the conflicts and injustices in the world. I don't feel positive about the future anymore. AI and climate change are just the latest threats to our too-comfortable 21st century. Have the seeds my generation sowed created a better world? If better means longer life expectancy, better cures for cancer, the reduced time it takes to get shopping delivered, or the choice of entertainment to watch, then today's harvest is much more bountiful than 30 years ago. But are all of those things worth the risks we are taking for the future, for what the next 30 years will deliver to us, or more realistically to our children and grandchildren? I am saddened by what it seems we are harvesting now – a damaged crop – but there are more harvests to come. And more seeds to be sowed.

At the Iftar, the room full of Jews and Muslims talking and eating together was

like a handful of seeds being scattered. It won't change the world, or even a corner of the world, but it seems like it's all most of us can do – take small actions, tell people about it, vote, scatter some more seeds, and don't give up hope. ■

## What We Harvest: Shabbat Refreshment

By Gay Teper

A smile, a nod, a few words exchanged. These are the mechanics of making a connection. Making a connection lifts my spirit. It refreshes me.

Shabbat services give this opportunity. We sing together, we pray together, we get up and sit down simultaneously. We pray both alone and together, sometimes responsively with the prayer leader. We connect with God and each other.

Shabbat services in a home add another dimension. We eat together too. (In some cultures if a couple eats together they marry!) We learn together. Here is an opportunity to use our brains and exchange ideas with other adults.

We connect with our past through Torah study, and ritual in the service.

All these opportunities allow for my involvement and connection both with God and others. And doesn't God do his/her work through others?

It is the coming together of me with my spirit and others in these contexts which enhances my Jewish experience, lifts my soul and provides refreshment.

I will continue to take this boat as it passes my desert island where we and my family are.

Thank you Kol Nefesh Masorti! ■



## The Kol Nefesh Green Team & Virtual Allotment Group

*Our Green Team remains active in bringing speakers to Kol Nefesh, and in advancing our EcoSynagogue activities. They also overlap heavily with our Virtual Allotment group, which you can read about here.*

*Anyone interested in joining the Green Team or the Virtual Allotment, please speak with Green Team head Daniel Preter, or email via our administrator, [admin@kolnefesh.org.uk](mailto:admin@kolnefesh.org.uk).*



### What We Harvest – If We Sow

By Daniel Preter

KOL NEFESH'S Allotment Group is a peculiar thing. Born during Covid times, when everyone was in dire need of access to the outdoors in order to stay sane, a small group of the community's garden enthusiasts came together once a month on Zoom. Five years later, we are still going strong.

Apart from exchanging tips on the best way to grow onions, sweet potatoes or roses, there's always some serious learning going on in our meetings. Rabbi Joel, who has been a keen member of the group right from the start, teaches on ancient agricultural laws in halachic texts and other sources, some of which are still applied to this day.

For example, we have discussed the different ways to support the poor with agricultural products – the *pe'ah*, *shich'cha*, *leket*, *peret* and *ol'lot*\* – and how the poor needed to collect the food themselves in order to preserve a sense of empowerment and dignity. Other subjects we have covered are the tithing for the Cohanim and Leviim, practically an ancient system of taxation. The discussions were particularly heated about some aspects of this that are still practised in Israel today. Two percent of the harvest in ancient times was assigned to the priests, who had to be in a state of ritual purity in

order to receive their shares. Since the destruction of the Temple this is no longer possible, which is why this is not done any more. However, the mitzvah still stands, and since the portion of the produce is no longer given to the Cohanim, it is deemed impure. The solution practised in Israel is that this portion of (perfectly edible) fruit and vegetables are left to rot, which is naturally a contentious subject in non-orthodox circles in Israel itself. People have tried to be more inventive, and found ways to circumvent this by giving the food products to the animals in the Jerusalem Zoo, which were symbolically sold to a Cohen for this purpose, or traders looking the other way when NGOs collect that portion in order to cook meals for the needy of society.

Scientific studies have shown that 25 percent of the population reported their gardening activities significantly increased during the pandemic. Other studies concentrate on the benefits of gardening for mental and physical health: feelings of self-efficacy and competence, as well as reduced stress, anxiety and even depression. Through direct engagement with the physical world, gardeners also build attachment to place, experience “overall feelings of joy, pride, purpose, peace, and

awe”, and report increased levels of relaxation. Gardening is a wonderful way to build social connections and bring people together.

One particularly beautiful discussion in the Allotment Group was on the subject of the miracle of composting: how kitchen waste such as old potato peels, apple cores and odd bits of cardboard can become the substrate for the next generation of plants, and how this awakens a feeling of awe in us.

For Tu B'Shvat we organised a very successful lunch (with a Tu B'Shvat cholent!) and shared some of the learning we have done over the last couple of years, as well as some practical gardening tips. We also shared what gardening means to us and how it helps our physical and mental health. On these pages you'll find some thoughts shared by our Allotment Group members, as well as the Tu B'Shvat cholent recipe.

We might be a small group but are not shy of growth, so whether you are a gardener or not, why not try and join us for our monthly meetings? Maybe one day you will also harvest what you sow! ■

\*See Rabbi Joel's article in this magazine for explanations of these terms.



### Tu B'Shvat (7 Species) Cholent

By Jamie Geller

#### Ingredients

- 1 large red onion, sliced
- 2 medium carrots, thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 cup wheat berries or emmer/farro
- 1 cup barley
- 1 cup raisins
- 1 cup Kalamata olives, pitted and chopped
- ½ cup dates, pitted and chopped
- ½ cup dried figs, stemmed and chopped
- Kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 7 cups vegetable broth or water
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- Garnish: Pomegranate arils, chopped flat-leaf parsley

#### Preparation

1. Preheat slow cooker to low.
2. Combine onions, carrots, tomato paste, garlic, wheat berries, barley, raisins, olives, dates, figs, salt, pepper, and broth or water in the insert of the slow cooker. Drizzle with olive oil.
3. Cover and cook overnight.
4. Before serving, scatter arils and parsley over the top.



*Jamie Geller's 7 Species Cholent. Images from <https://jamiiegeller.com/>*

### Igor Senderovich

Aside from getting my hands dirty after the sterility of a day or week involved in an all-mental profession, and also seeing the satisfaction in the results, there is a spiritual dimension to gardening for me.

We talk about the vulnerability of our subsistence farmer ancestors that was to add to their devotion and sense of gratitude at harvest time. I cannot claim to experience trepidation over my balcony strawberry harvest, but after committing time to gardening and watching the growth with hope – having satisfaction both in how it grew and the resulting harvest I can offer to my children – I am emotionally tied up in the endeavour. In this context, the vulnerability of my seedlings to weather, and my humility before the complexity of nature with its infestations and moulds, all take on a spiritual dimension.

Additionally, in the Jewish sense that material things should not be considered disposable but rather imbued with spiritual potential, it is uplifting to see my kitchen refuse become composted and serve a new purpose in beauty, food and emotional satisfaction.

### Jeremy Kelly

My garden is my sanctuary; the place where I find peace and a space to pause and reflect on life, its challenges – and its successes too! Adding a convivial, mostly male (!) conversation around gardening each month and then investigating, with inspiring fellow gardener Rabbi Joel, the halacha surrounding growing and harvesting brings a contemporary and Jewish infusion into one of my life's passions!



### Maurice Gold

My thing is conservation work, rather than gardening per se, mainly at Fryent Country Park in Kingsbury/Wembley Park: being outdoors in all weather on Sundays throughout the year in fields and woods; working as part of a group, undertaking lightly strenuous work, with a common purpose which seems worthwhile; experiencing the changing seasons and the life force of nature, always changing, always burgeoning, always fascinating.

### Mike Simmonds

Apart from the weather affecting plant growth there is nothing more satisfying than seeing those first green shoots emerging following a cold season. They do give you a spiritual uplift, and this is often echoed in comments from a yoga group I know well. Pots and boxes in the garden also do the same thing. Happy gardening!



## Shema Koleinu: Hear Our Voice!

By Janine Stein

WHEN MY FIRST DAUGHTER had her bat mitzvah twenty years ago, it was a terrifying experience for me. She was expected to know so many of the prayers and rituals that I didn't know how to do myself. For my own Bat Mitzvah in Cape Town, a hundred years ago, I was one of twelve girls wearing white, and we recited sections of the Amidah together. Other than how to properly kasher chicken livers, that was all we learned.

There were many prayers and actions in the service that I had seen and heard as a Jew in a pew, but I knew I couldn't stand up in front of everyone and actually perform them. How could I fulfil the commandment of the Shema, where it says "Teach them thoroughly to your children", when I didn't know them myself?

I worried that for my daughter's bat mitzvah, the whole community would see that I was a fraud. All that stood between me and total humiliation was a tape recording of *Essa Einai*, Psalm 121, for my daughter to practise at home. On the day, I was nervous instead of serene. For us, help came too late.

This year, Shema Koleinu, the Masorti prayer skills website, was launched. This exceptionally useful website has many different elements, including a whole section for b'nei mitzvah. There are the prayers for Kiddush, the Shema, Torah blessings, Haftarah blessings, Havdalah – and, yes, there's also *Essa Einai*, Psalm 121, with two different tunes to choose between. Besides the sound files for each prayer, the text of the prayer is provided in Hebrew, transliterated and in English translation. There are also engaging explanations about the why. It's all clear, attractive and easy to use. There's also a useful video section on how to do aliyot.

Shema Koleinu was made possible thanks to the Lottery Heritage Fund. It captures our rich UK musical-liturgical heritage and makes it accessible to parents, children, prayer leaders and punters. The hope is that it deepens understanding, engenders a sense of spirituality, and fosters community. More than just an online resource, it also offers courses that teach skills directly from skilled teachers.

It allows you to practise the prayers and much else to enrich your Jewish journey, and to deepen your ability to connect with our tradition. This site explains the choreography used in daily prayer, home rituals and lifecycle events. It has prayers for Shabbat, weekdays and festivals. Recently, the Acheinu prayer, which we now say for the hostages, was uploaded as well.

There's a lot to learn in our long and rich prayer tradition, and it's impossible to know it all. Our journey starts with knowing where to look, and by bookmarking Shema Koleinu at [masortiprayer.org.uk](http://masortiprayer.org.uk). ■

## "And You Shall Teach Your Children": Masorti Judaism Looks Forward

WHEN THE TEMPLE WAS DESTROYED by the Romans in 70 CE, Judaism as it was practised then ended. For Passover, that meant there could be no more pilgrimages to Jerusalem, and there would be no more whole roasted Pascal lamb eaten together by the whole family at night.

How could the leader of the household keep the biblical injunction that one should tell one's children about the Exodus? How would the traditional singing of Hallel at home at the Seder continue? The trauma of the events surrounding the destruction of the Temple, and the mourning for the form of Judaism that was destroyed with it, must have continued for generations.

Yet all was not lost. According to the Talmud, Judaism's core beliefs, stories and traditions were rescued by Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai, who was sneaked out of besieged Jerusalem in a coffin. He established a Yeshiva in Yavne, from where a new form of Judaism was created. Passover Seders continued, and young children continued to ask "Mah nishtanah" – why is this night different. Gamliei II went on to reinterpret the Seder and new traditions were created. Over the next 1,000 years, slight changes to the Haggadah were made. Three questions became four questions. New tunes were brought to old words. We still sing Hallel. We still have a lot to be grateful for. We still eat bitter herbs and matzah.

The seder is not a record-player of old events. It is a living, transcendental experience performed by and for everyone present. We teach our children that they too came out of Egypt, that their ancestors were once slaves in the Land of Egypt, that they too were miraculously redeemed and freed to continue their journey through Sinai and beyond.

But we worry. Will our children create that experience for their own children? Will our beloved traditions end with us? We worry that our divisions and infighting will break us. We worry about the threats to our Jewish bodies. We experience moral loneliness, social alienation and a sense of meaninglessness.

Masorti Judaism understands that fear. We understand the desire to belong to a Jewish community where you can bring the whole of yourself, with all your inherited memories and traditions, as well as your need to keep learning, adapting and connecting. We are committed to making a difference to helping all people at all stages in their Jewish journey.

We hope that that the parts of our tradition that we love will be alive for us at our Seders this year. We trust that love of our tradition can be transmitted beyond us, onwards to the next generation.

"You shall teach your children" is perhaps what we should relearn ourselves. Our tradition is resilient and alive and relevant. We have survived and in one form or another, we will survive yet again. ■

# Community News

## Mazal Tov...

... To **Ilana Fenster & Dan Simons** on the birth of a baby girl, **Raya Shiri Fenster-Simons**. Mazal tov as well to grandparents **Mike Fenster & Aviva Shafritz, Shirley Fenster & Howard Feldman**, Uncles **Leon and Joel**, and big sister **Ariella**.

... To **Jordan & David Maskill** on the birth of a son, **Asher Reuben Maskill**. And mazal tov to grandparents **Marc Shoffren & Shelley Marsh** and Auntie **Eden!**

... To **Harry Kelly & Katie Maguire**, and proud parents **Melanie & Jeremy Kelly**, on Harry & Katie's marriage.

... To **Rafi Herman** and parents **Hayley & Marc** on Rafi's upcoming marriage to **Georgina James**.

... To **Ruth Kaufmann-Wolfe, Ben Collins**, and parents **Georgia Kaufmann & Richard Wolfe** on Ruth and Ben's upcoming marriage.

... To **Hannah Kaufmann-Wolfe** on qualifying to be a medical doctor.

... To **Guang (Ora) Xu** on completing her conversion.

... To **Ilan Driver** and **Eli Morris** on their B'nai Mitzvah (see pages 24–26).



Clockwise from top: Baby Raya with the family, Harry & Katie, Asher Reuben, Rafi & Georgina, Ruth & Ben, Hannah



## Condolences

To Joan Cohen on the death of her brother, Peter Senker.

To Dudley Cohen on the death of his sister, Shelley Morris.

To Jonathan Niman on the death of his mother, Dorothy Levy.

We mourn the loss of Kol Nefesh members Lilian Rubin and Brian Chernett. Please see pages 15–24.

We wish all their families and friends strength and comfort.

יהי זכרם ברוך

## Welcome to New Members!

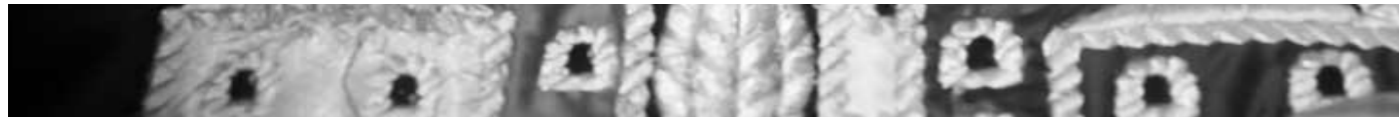
**Jonathan Meldrum**  
**Guang (Ora) Xu**

And sorry to see you go...

Goodbye to members who are leaving us.  
You're always welcome within our doors.

**Jordan (Marsh) Maskill**





## Tikkun Olam

### A Heartfelt Thank You and Update from Manna/Meir Panim

By Jeremy Kelly

IN FEBRUARY I travelled to Israel for a few days to visit Meir Panim's operations. Manna is the UK branch of Meir Panim, fundraising towards its operation in Israel. I saw firsthand how we support the hungry and displaced in Israel, and I wanted to share a short report of how the donations made at our Kol Nidre Appeal have been used.

My visit highlighted the critical role Meir Panim plays in supporting vulnerable populations. I saw clearly that Meir Panim serves not only those traditionally considered "poor", but also the working poor – individuals employed at minimum wage who struggle to afford basic necessities like food after covering rent and medical expenses. The elderly, facing pensions of less than £500 per month, are particularly impacted by rising food costs, exacerbated by the recent war and increases in VAT.

Donations from organisations like Kol Nefesh, alongside generous in-kind and cash contributions from Israeli donors like Leket (who provide harvested produce) and Latet (who supply packed goods), are the lifeblood of Meir Panim. These resources enable us to provide nutritious meals and essential support to those in need.

#### The Ongoing Need

The economic prosperity enjoyed by Israel's high-tech sector hasn't reached everyone. Rising prices, increasing as a result of the war, disproportionately affect those at the lower end of the income scale, making Meir Panim's services a lifeline for so many.

During my visit, I witnessed firsthand the incredible work being done at our

branches, and the dedication of our staff and volunteers. I also saw the challenges they face.

For example, the Tiberias branch supports 250–300 people daily, providing meals Sunday through Thursday (including Shabbat meals on Thursday) as well as challah. Fresh fruit and vegetables are distributed on Wednesdays. The branch manager, Yehudit, is supported by six community service workers and volunteers from the local community and from schools. The war has tripled her workload, with both regular patrons and a significant influx of displaced families from the Lebanese border area. The war has also negatively impacted the local economy in Tiberias, leading to increased unemployment and higher living costs, resulting in more local residents relying on Meir Panim's services.

Yehudit is described as a true force of nature. She not only provides meals but also offers support and a listening ear to those struggling. She knows her patrons and their stories, providing not just food, but other forms of tangible help, as well as a sense of connection.

I witnessed Yehudit providing bread to a man who was clearly unwell and suffering from cancer, demonstrating her compassionate approach and commitment to the well-being of those she serves. She arranged for him to visit the branch again the following week so she could help him with some of the admin required to secure medical assistance.

The financial donations Meir Panim receives are crucial. In Tiberias, for instance, the team has been able to improve their facilities to meet increasing demand. But the kitchen desperately

needs a complete overhaul to ensure their vital work can continue. In the Tzefat branch, recently installed walk-in freezers have been transformative, significantly increasing the branch's capacity to serve the community. However, the branch itself still needs attention to create a more welcoming and functional environment.

#### Stories of Resilience

I had the opportunity to speak with three women from Kiryat Shmona who have been displaced for 18 months due to the war and are currently living in a hotel. Many homes in Kiryat Shmona and Metulla have been damaged or destroyed by rockets and shrapnel. While the government covers their accommodation costs, these individuals are responsible for their own living expenses, making the food provided by Meir Panim a crucial lifeline. Many are unable to return home until safe rooms are constructed. Some have been able to find work, with employers providing transportation, but others are unemployed and reliant on benefits.

If on your next visit to Israel you have time to volunteer at a Meir Panim branch, we'd welcome your support. Just a couple of hours helping to prepare meals or distribute bags of food and vegetables can make such a difference to our patrons – and help is always welcomed. Contact me and I will make arrangements for your visit. ■

*Jeremy Kelly is the Chief Executive of Manna, the UK face of Meir Panim. You can reach him on [Jeremy@mannauk.org](mailto:Jeremy@mannauk.org).*



THE KOL NEFESH community mourns the loss of two very special people over the past few months: Lilian Rubin ז"ל and Brian Chernetz ז"ל.

Lilian was a quiet, much-loved presence at Kol Nefesh over recent years, until fading health made it impossible for her to attend services or community events. We will always remember Lilian and her cherished Lev ז"ל as embodying the spirit of our community – a zeal for learning with an open heart.

Brian ... what can we say about Brian? Never one to take the limelight, he was always there, keeping us grounded, helping us stay focused at times of uncertainty, always thinking about our future. He was not a shul-goer, but was instrumental in establishing our structure and vision, and he led many sessions on developing our dreams and ambitions during the High Holidays. His care for Kol Nefesh grew out of his love for our treasured Chagan Jacky, but it blossomed into something personal and independent. We will all miss him deeply.

The stone settings for both Lilian and Brian will be on Sunday 19th October, Lilian at 11am and Brian at 1pm, at the Woodland Cemetery, Chesbunt.

תהיינה נשמותיהם צרורות בצרור החיים  
May Their Souls Be Bound Up in the Bond of Life



Lilian Rubin, ז"ל

ליבע גיטל (טובה) בת יוסף ורחל ז"ל

6 April 1929 – 6 December 2024

25 Adar II 5689 – 5 Kislev 5785

MUM WAS BORN in Glasgow in 1929. She was the eldest of two, and had a younger brother, Michael, who became a doctor.

I don't think her parents had the happiest of marriages, and after Mum studied for a Masters in English and Philosophy at Glasgow University she left home.

She moved briefly to Manchester, where she worked on a periodical for a company producing minerals. She then moved to London, where she made many lifelong friends and where she met Dad.

The story goes that they first met when mum was walking along whistling a tune. Dad said, "Do you know what you are whistling?" Mum didn't give him much of a reply... They met a couple of years later and got on better. They were married in 1957 and enjoyed 59 years of married life.

I was born in 1960 and Daniel in 1963.

Life wasn't so easy then. Mum recalled that, as a newborn, Dan kept her up most nights. On the rare occasion that he didn't, I bravely stepped in to make sure mum didn't get any sleep at all!

She developed her career by becoming an archivist and indexer, and over the years indexed a couple of Chief Rabbis' books and 10 years of the Jewish Chronicle from the 1930's. It's hard to imagine how difficult that must have been.

This work gives a clue about her character. She was intelligent and meticulous. Around the house she had a place for everything and everything in its place. Everything was labelled. If you looked in a cupboard you might have seen several bags, each labelled: "duvet, single", "duvet, double", "duvet, winter", etc. Dad's Panama hat was kept in a clear plastic box. "Panama hat", said the label, as if you couldn't see inside! She wasn't obsessive, to her it was all just matter of fact.

This desire to record and catalogue went

to some lengths. Our parents loved classical music. It was always playing in the house when we were kids. I think it may have cured me of classical music...

Mum had a huge collection of classical music CDs. And yes, they were all labelled and catalogued. Each CD had a little coloured sticker like a library system. And then there was a big typed catalogue of all the tracks, despite the fact that you could just pick up the CD and read it.

I'll skip forwards a few decades and pick up this music theme again.

While living in the flat our parents would attend classical recitals given in the house next door to the block. They would go a couple of times a year and mum continued to do this after Dad died. I would help Mum with making sure she wrote a cheque and then put the date on the calendar. However one year she said she didn't want to go. This seemed very odd,

*Continued on next page.*



*Continued from previous page.*

but we accepted her decision not to attend. Looking back on this, it now seems clear that it heralded the start of her illness in later life.

When she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's we had a decision to make about how she was going to be looked after. We decided that her own flat was the best place. We had agency carers for six days a week and a private team of carers to cover a Saturday or a Sunday.

I particularly wanted to mention Alison and Mary, who looked after Mum on these days. Not only did they care for Mum, but they cared *about* Mum. I would often pop in to find Mum either enjoying watching a film or being encouraged to do some exercises.

So to go back in time, what did Mum do? She was our mother. She brought us up with love, care and affection. She was never angry, we were not shouted at, although we certainly knew when we were being told off for something. She made sure we were clothed, fed and looked after. She took us to the doctor and the dentist. At home clothes were ironed, bedsheets and blankets were smoothed.

My particular memories are of all the food she produced. Roast chicken, meat loaf, occasionally lamb chops grilled on an old Cannon cooker with a ferociously



hot grill under which they'd flare and spit. Roast potatoes with crispy onions. Big pans of fried fish.

Even now, whenever I cook fried fish and see the fish bubbling in the pan, I am immediately transported back to her kitchen.

Thank you Mum.

—Mark Rubin

I FIND THIS very hard to write because by the time I was visiting Lilian at home every week, her short-term and long-term memory had diminished severely. This reminded me of my experience when Miri, Simon and I visited Sue's mum, Jean, after she had moved into a care home. However, with Jean, it was primarily the day-to-day memories that she found difficult to recollect. This may seem very stupid to you but my exposure to Jean's condition really brought home to me that we are nothing without our memories.

So, when I tried to communicate with Lilian, I tried a variety of ways to engage with her. Initially, she could leave the flat with a little help and I would take her out for a breath of fresh air. So, we visited Trent Park, Broomfield Park and other green spaces. When that was no longer possible, I would read articles to her from the JC and Kol Nefesh's magazine. I persuaded her to play Scrabble and Rummikub. I read short stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer. I played music from the family PC. We would watch a film together but she found it very hard to follow what was going on.

So, how had I met Lilian? Lilian and Lev



And in Lev's and Lilian's homely flat at Southgate Green was a bookcase devoted to Judaica. Who had acquired these books? Who had been interested? I might have been tempted to say that the primary investigator was Lev but only after Lilian had died did her other son Mark show me the Littman Library's three-volume translation of the

*Lilian with Lev and (at right) her father, Joe.*

had joined Kol Nefesh in April 2005. Sue and I got on very well with them. They came to us for tea and they reciprocated. But looking back, I realise it was Lev who was the gregarious one. Lilian was much quieter and did not talk about herself.

After Lev died in September 2016, Lilian continued to come to shul every fortnight. Some members of our shul gave her lifts. And then her visits ceased. Travelling became too difficult. I started to visit her regularly. However, when I tried to find out about her childhood, her time at university and her working life, she could not remember very much. That was a pity, because we had things in common.

Lilian knew that she had grown up in Glasgow. You wouldn't know it. I could not detect a Scottish accent. Both of my parents had grown up in Glasgow. But it was not possible to discuss Lilian's early history.

Lev and Lilian had enjoyed going to Sunday evening chamber music concerts at the Conway Hall in Red Lion Square, Holborn. I used to go every week with my parents, my maternal grandmother and my uncle. But Lilian had lost her interest in such music. She didn't listen to Radio 3. So, I used the PC, with which her son Daniel used to talk to her every day, to find suitable pieces on the radio or on YouTube. There was one occasion when I tried to explain what I had been doing on my Zoom series on the History of Rock Music and I was able to elicit some interest in Amy Winehouse because she had been a Southgate girl, an area where Lev and Lilian had lived for many years. Such instances were rare but I treasure them.

Zohar and who had prepared the index. And Lilian had performed a similar service for books written by Chief Rabbis Jakobovits and Sacks. All of this was a revelation.

And finally, Lilian had a complete set of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. She had read all six books. That suggested someone with a fine mind. I only wish I could have known her much earlier. I cannot help feeling regretful when I consider the conversations we might have had.

—Nabum Gordon

LILIAN WAS Kol Nefesh's senior member and she and Lev, her late husband, were amongst the early founders. A quiet, learned and dignified lady who was a regular attender at schule and communal events, and participated online during Covid until her increasing frailty intervened. She loved her family, books and music. She was well organised as is attested by her involvement in publishing.

Kol Nefesh is the poorer without her presence. May her and Lev's memories be for a blessing.

—Tanya Novick

JEREMY AND I first met Lilian and Lev in the early 1990s. We were newly engaged and attending what was then New Whetstone Masorti. We were new members and so were they.

We were very young at the time and in retrospect quite naïve. Our main connections with people of their vintage were our grandparents. Conversations with them were the type everyone has with grandparents, full of love, their memories and what's new in your life bubblah.

With Lev and Lilian, we had a different relationship. We discovered people who didn't just want to talk about their pasts but were also deeply engaged intellectually and actively in their present. Despite being to us quite old, they had given up membership in their previous shul and moved to join a new one. They did this again when they followed us to Edgware and Kol Nefesh. Our need was for a larger community that could support our growing family, theirs was because they wanted something more suited to their values, understanding of Judaism and where they could be challenged in an intelligent manner. I thought that was brave then. Now, as we approach the age they were when we first met them, I know it to be.

Even after Lev died, Lilian continued for



as long as she was able to be curious, to engage with life in the moment. I loved discussing poetry with her and any issues of the day. Our memories of her are only good and inspirational.

—Melanie Kelly

I REMEMBER LILIAN as strong and committed to her ideas and beliefs. I was impressed by her determination to participate in Kol Nefesh, even when it may have been difficult for her. She was very present, and though there were times she didn't say much, when she did speak, she had something to say. I will miss her.

—Andrea Grabame

## Brian Chernett, ז"ל

מנחם זעליג בן יהודה לייב ודבורה ז"ל

18 October 1936 – 31 January 2025

2 Cheshvan 5697 – 2 Shevat 5785



**B**RIAN EMANUEL CHERNETT.

Aka:  
Bri Bri  
Dad  
Grandpa Brian  
Grandpa Pi Pi  
Great Grandpa Brian  
Chief Dream Maker

Born 18/10/1936 to Louis and Doris Chernett. Eldest of four brothers. Brother to Peter, Paul and Jonathan.

Dad loved his brothers very much, and growing up we saw a lot of them and their wives, Valerie, Anne and Cynthia, and their children. Dad's best friend was Peter. They referred to themselves as "the mutual admiration society". Tragically Peter died, leaving Valerie and their three young children, who eventually moved to Israel. This irrevocably changed the lives of the whole family. Dad was absolutely committed to ensur-

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ing Valerie and the girls were always a big part of our lives.

It is hard to consolidate someone's 88 years of life in one speech, but we will do our best to give you the essence. Mum, family and friends, sport, and his career. This came in the form of many different things. But essentially it was helping people achieve their dreams.

### Mum

They met at his cousin's Bar Mitzvah, introduced by his lovely cousin Andrea (who also introduced Peter to Valerie), and it was love at first sight. Very soon after their meeting he went to live in Canada. But after three months he knew he had to be with her, so he offered to buy a caravan for them to live in. Clearly she was having none of that, so he came back to the UK.

When Dad was 25 and Mum was 20 they married, and after three years they had the first of their three daughters, Judy. Three years later came Rachel, and three years after that Anna was born. He told each of us that we were his favourite, but only years later we found out he said the same to the other two. We knew he was proud of us and we were equally proud of him.

Mum and Dad had a wonderful marriage which spanned 63 years. Both were inspirational people, loved by anyone who came into contact with them. They both had big missions in life to fulfil. Both in our eyes have succeeded and even surpassed their goals. They gave each other the respect, space, confidence and love to do this.

Mum and Dad have shown us what a great marriage can be. They have worked together through trials and tribulations to make it one of the best success stories. How lucky are we to have been brought up by two great parents.

*Right: Brian & Jacky with the family on their 50th wedding anniversary.*

*Above: Brian, then Executive Chairman of Ella Forums, at the launch of a Liverpool Third Sector Leadership Development Programme at Everton Football Club.*

*All photos courtesy of Rena Pearl.*

### Family

Dad was a big family man. He worked tirelessly when we were small, building the life that we became accustomed to and are forever grateful for. We had numerous theatre trips, fantastic holidays and celebration dinners. Dad was very "proper". He was a stickler for good timekeeping and liked us to be polite (that actually could be from Mum, but as they worked as a team it's hard to separate who instilled which bit!). He encouraged us to always be honest and true to ourselves and to make our lives fun and meaningful. After the three of us got married and Harry, Jason and Paul came into the family, Dad loved it and really adored his sons-in-law, who clearly adored him. Dad will be buried next to Paul, who we all miss desperately every day. Dad was a rock to Anna, Bethany and Emily from this moment and never stopped.

He was a reluctant grandpa before Ben was born, as he thought it would make him sound old. But the moment Ben arrived he was the most enthusiastic, loving, supportive grandpa anyone could wish for. Personally I think it was just so he could have a new audience for his next life lesson.

After Ben, Simeon was born. Dad was overjoyed that there were now six men in the family (it was irrelevant that two were babies). Tami was next and then Dan, followed by Georgie and Miki and then Bethany, Ella and Emily. And I don't know if he ever mentioned his great

grandson Joshua Harry Brian Daniel! He adored it when all his grandchildren were around him, and he used to love taking each grandchild to the theatre or sports matches, establishing a relationship with each one of them. He went as far as banning Mum from joining him on these trips. And so long as he didn't sing or try to tell jokes they were equally as enthusiastic to be with him. He also loved his many cousins, nephews and nieces, and had a particularly close bond with Jane, Robbin and Emma. There are so many funny moments, like when dad ate the cat treats thinking they were sweets, and how he loved throwing a piece of challah to Archie our dog, but only allowing him to eat it when he said it was kosher. He



loved a good laugh and always found a reason to celebrate life.

Dad also had so many friends who loved him and speak so highly of him. And we include some of his colleagues under the heading of friends and bromances. He and Mum loved to travel and loved the theatre. They were real explorers (well, in comfort obviously). They had some great times with all their friends. When we were little they held many dinner parties and we used to sneak out of our rooms and sit by the stairs trying to hear what they were talking about. Now as adults with our own children we are pleased we didn't hear!!

### Sport

As we were growing up Dad used to speak a bit about football, and he used to watch it on TV, but his main loves were cricket and rugby. When his grandsons came along with their passion for football and Tottenham his love for the team grew through theirs. He was ecstatic when they created a YouTube channel, "We Are Tottenham TV" (if you haven't already done so – please like and subscribe). He was a regular contributor to the channel and had lots to say. Ben and Sim started getting recognised by members of the public from the channel, and soon after so did Grandpa Brian – he couldn't have been prouder and more excited by this. The past season with Spurs has been difficult but it gave him a lot to speak about. He had strong opinions which always put a positive spin on things – outshining the more angry pessimistic comments. Hate language distressed him greatly. It is wonderful that the last game Spurs played they won 3–0, which made him very happy as he pre-



dicted a win. This was one of the last things he said.

### Career

Now on to his final and most notable passion: helping people achieve their dreams. Dad was always at his happiest and most fulfilled when he was working. His life at home and his work were intertwined. It was never a burden or hardship, it was his life. After a career in retail and then wholesale, he went on to find his true purpose in a career coaching others, using his vast experience to help leaders achieve their full potential. He then progressed to coaching leaders of charities, drawing on his business experience. Finally he found true value in coaching people to achieve their dreams. There are many testimonies from so many people far and wide of the value that Dad has added to their lives. He was doing this right up to the week of his death.

Dad, it has been an honour and privilege to have supported you throughout your long illness. We turned the many hospital trips into the most positive experience we could. Spending lots of time individually with you, creating precious memories. You squeezed every amount of energy into your life and did not want to give in. You were coaching people and adding value to their lives to the very end. You have been an inspiration to all of us.

You have been the most wonderful husband, brother, father, grandfather and great-grandfather. We have been blessed to be your daughters. Rest in peace, Dad. You will be in our hearts and souls forever.

Dad was always conscious of leaving a legacy. He manifested this in many forms, but it always came down to the same thing, and if you were fortunate you would have been given the latest version. Dad was so sad listening to the news about various wars and events

around the world recently. He believed that if we all acted with love and kindness towards our communities, the world would be a better place – and it could end wars and selfishness. It sounds so simple. And it is. By community Dad meant your family. Your friends. And your colleagues. All of us have many different communities in our lives. And when you stop to think about it, it is amazing just how many. If we all did this and then each person passed it forwards, Dad is right, the world would be a kinder place, filled with love. So if anyone would like to help Dad continue his dream, please do. It seems a simple ask.

*—Judy Daniel, Rachel Friend, & Anna Kinchuk*

**B**RIAN WAS A REMARKABLE individual who embodied the true essence of love and kindness. He was not just a friend, mentor, or colleague; he was an inspiration to all who had the privilege of knowing him. Brian had an extraordinary gift for uplifting those around him, always encouraging others to pursue their dreams and aspirations with unwavering support.

Brian demonstrated a profound understanding of the power of kindness. He believed that everyone has the potential to achieve greatness, and he dedicated much of his life to helping others realise their goals. Whether through his work with the Academy for Chief Executives and Ella, or simply through his kindness and unwavering support in everyday conversations or community involvement, Brian was always there to lift spirits and ignite passions.

I had the privilege of undertaking several public relations photographic assignments for Brian, where I had the opportunity to sit in on his workshops and seminars focused on achieving goals and aspects of leadership. I found them to be inspiring, but must admit I didn't always follow through on his suggestions.

I also had the benefit of being part of Brian's extended family, and used to love seeing the interaction between him and

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his daughters, Judy, Rachel and Anna, and all his grandchildren. The depth of love and support was truly inspiring, and I hoped contagious. I loved the childlike fun Brian had making kiddish and carrying on his father's tradition of throwing a piece of challah to all who were there rather than merely passing a piece around to each.

Bri Bri (as he was known to some) thrived on other people's successes, especially Jacky's. I remember when Jacky was studying to be a chazan in New York, travelling back and forth every two weeks. Brian was so supportive, selfless, egoless; he was a true mensch. This was a big lesson for me.

His approach to life was rooted in empathy and compassion. Brian took the time to listen, truly listen, to the dreams and aspirations of others. He never hesitated to share his wisdom, providing guidance that was both practical and heartfelt. His encouraging words often served as a catalyst for change, motivating countless individuals to take bold steps towards their goals.

Brian used to say that he had to leave a legacy, but he never seemed sure what it would be. That legacy is one of selflessness and dedication to the betterment of others. Brian believed that by helping others succeed, he could create a ripple effect of positivity and inspiration. His warm smile and genuine nature made everyone feel valued and supported, creating a lasting impact on the lives of many.

As I remember Brian, I celebrate a man whose life was a testament to the power of love, kindness, and inspiration. He leaves behind a rich legacy that will continue to inspire generations to dream big and support one another in their journeys. Brian's spirit will forever remain in the hearts of those he touched, encouraging us all to strive for our dreams with the same passion and dedication he exemplified.

Brian, your light will continue to shine in the lives of all whom you inspired.

—Rena Pearl

**T**HE TALMUD SAYS:

#### **Talmud Bavli, B'rachot 5a**

Rabbi Zeira, and some say Rabbi Chanina bar Pappa, said:

Come and see how the characteristics of the Holy One, Blessed be He, are unlike the characteristics of flesh and blood.

It is characteristic of flesh and blood that when one sells an object to another, the seller grieves (the loss of his possession) and the buyer rejoices.

With regard to the Holy One, Blessed be He, however, this is not so.

He gave the Torah to Israel and rejoiced, as it is stated (Proverbs 4:2): "For I have given you a good portion, My Torah, do not abandon it."

Brian will be remembered as an exceptional person who experienced the sharing of his wisdom and the spreading of his love as a profound pleasure almost up to the very last moments of his life. He never really paused for breath through his latter years. To stop would be to miss out on the opportunity to experience the joy of helping.

Brian understood deeply that education starts with questions, not answers. That is the Jewish model, enshrined in our seder, that we so often forget.

#### **Mishnah Pesachim 10:4**

And here the son questions his father. And if the son lacks awareness his father instructs him: How different this night is from all other nights!...

The truly great study partner, chavruta, is the one who helps us to ask our deepest questions; not the one with all the answers. Brian was such a chavruta to hundreds – helping so many of us to ask the deepest questions of ourselves.

—Rabbi Joel Levy

**I**MET BRIAN about 20 years ago going round the park for a walk in between services on Yom Kippur and there was an immediate rapport. Brian was a well-known figure within KNM, and I was

rather honoured that he wanted to have a chat with me and subsequently that he took an interest in me. The walk became an annual occurrence, although I often saw him when KNM events were taking place either in Brockley Close or Peters Lodge. I used to like going to these events, because if there was a sporting event on television, Brian would signal to me to drop into his office – he was the first person I knew who had a cinema-screen size TV.

Brian was a remarkable listener: he was never loud or extrovert, and he had this great gift of being able to listen and then promote a discussion without taking centre stage. This was a gift that I admired, and in later years, something I tried to emulate. He was always interested in my career, and on one occasion, I needed to discuss where I was going as I was very much at a cross roads in my career. Brian was very helpful, and being on the board of a legal practice, gave me an introduction to that firm, although in the end I didn't proceed with them. Some years ago, a few of us thought it would be a good idea to have a "boys night out" which of course comprised a lot of food and a fair amount of drink. Paul Collin, Danny Kalman and I (far and away the youngest) had a splendid evening out, on the basis that what was discussed at the dinner table remained there. I realised what good company Brian was, and what a clear thinker.

When Jacky won her place to study in New York, he was so excited by the news and so proud of her, and it just happened that I spoke to him the day they heard about this. He loved telling everyone about his trips to see her in New York, and he was so proud of her at her induction, it was a joy to see. His pride in his family was infectious, and I always remember him telling me that he was determined to spend some quality time with each of his grandchildren.

I will remember him for his kindness, humour, insight, and genuine warmth as an individual. We as a community owe a lot to Brian, especially in the early days, and I owe him a lot, especially for being a good listener and a sounding board.

—Michael Shapiro

**I** FEEL PRIVILEGED that I was able to spend so much time with Brian, genuinely a kind, wise and truthful man. Brian and I met at Kol Nefesh and initially our connection was an annual walk on Yom Kippur afternoon. During one of these walks we realised we shared many interests, namely an interest in good leadership, retail backgrounds, Spurs and politics. By chance Brian's birthday was the same as our daughter's (so I had no excuse to forget his birthday).

Brian's charisma quickly led to my involvement in Ella Forums (a charity promoting leadership development) and before I realised it he had asked me to succeed him as CEO. I remain involved and currently chair the Board. Brian continued to be an amazing supporter and mentor to many Ella members.

For the past seven years or so on almost every Saturday morning, while Jacky went to shul, Brian and I walked around his local park and then on to Edgware for a coffee. After a couple of hours we had solved global political issues and discussed the latest games in football, cricket and rugby. We got to know each other's families and whenever my mobile rang my grandsons would always ask, "Is it Brian?" (It usually was!)

Going to see Spurs together created memorable shared experiences, some celebratory along with many disappointments. We often sat with members of Brian's family, and he would then be interviewed on the YouTube channel "We are Tottenham TV", run by two of his grandchildren, Ben and Simmy. Other shared sporting events included cricket games at Lords and rugby at Twickenham. I spent hours in Brian's office/TV room, watching a variety of sporting events but mostly Spurs away matches.

Brian was an inspirational mentor for me and for many other members of our community. He was a catalyst for change, enabling people to "realise their dreams". How many people start a new venture at the age of 85? In Brian's case it was Wisdom Wins, and he was so proud of those he coached.

I miss Brian very much and treasure the time we had together.

—Danny Kalman

**W**E FIRST MET BRIAN back in 1984. We had just returned from a tour of duty in Berlin where Steve had spent three years doing nefarious deeds behind the Iron Curtain in East Germany. We had lost contact with any Jewish community in the UK and were suddenly confronted with living in the heart of Anglo-Jewry in North London. Our children were 7 and 4 years old and we needed to immerse ourselves back into a Jewish community, but which one? In the past this had been easy to decide because we simply joined the only one available. Now we were spoilt for choice.

Following the recommendation of our good friend Rabbi Elliott Marmon, the US Air Force Jewish chaplain in the UK, we turned up one Shabbat morning at Edgware Masorti Synagogue (EMS), met Jacky and Brian, and the rest as the saying goes was history.

Looking back these past 40+ years, we had little awareness at the beginning just what a hugely positive influence Brian would have on our Jewish journey, our growing family and our appreciation of the value of having such a true and sincere friend. Jacky of course took the lead with all things spiritual, theological and Judaic while Brian was the constant, the rock, and solid foundation and the wonderful example of generous and steadfast friendship.

The first major indication of what was to come occurred when Simeon had his Bar Mitzvah. We were living just outside York at the time. The service of course was in the shul, but Brian and Jacky opened their home to us to enable the celebration afterwards to be in a family atmosphere among the many friends we now had in the community.

This generous hospitality would continue for the next four decades. We rarely lived in London but we did try to attend EMS and subsequently Kol Nefesh services as often as we could. We had a permanent invitation to stay with Jacky and Brian, using what Brian dubbed the Griffpad in which to lay our weary heads. All such visits involved long and fascinating discussions with Brian on our military life, on our families and on his work mentor-

ing CEOs and other business leaders. This latter led to Brian inviting Steve to be a speaker at some of the group meetings. In return Steve undertook administrative tasks to keep the organisation running smoothly. Thus Steve developed a really deep appreciation of the respect that Brian enjoyed from colleagues for his wisdom, leadership and above all his kindness.

And of course our many visits with Brian included partisan discussions on sport. Micky and Brian discovered a mutual love of rugby, especially the home nations contest in the Spring. Jacky and Steve would be in the lounge discussing some aspect of Judaism when a raucous roar of joy or despair would emanate from down the corridor indicating the fortunes of the contestants.

Another major activity that brought us close to Brian was the many holidays that we shared with him and Jacky. We went as far afield as New Zealand, Canada, the USA, Norway and several river cruises within Europe. Brian was a great explorer and liked to be active wherever we went. The cry often went up "Where is Brian?", last seen wandering down an obscure back street somewhere to investigate something that had caught his attention. We all derived absolute joy from sharing these holiday experiences with Brian because of his total focus on what he could learn from them.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons we learnt from Brian was his devotion to and involvement with his family. All were treated with love, generosity and support, but especially as his grandchildren grew older he deliberately planned outings with them individually to develop that one-to-one relationship so essential across the generations. We unashamedly copied his example with our own family, and with such positive and happy results.

Brian did so much in his life to the benefit of his friends, his family and his work colleagues. We feel so blessed to have been among those to have reaped such a rich harvest.

—Steve & Micky Griffiths

I WOULD LIKE TO SHARE some insight into why Brian was such a special person for me.

First of all he was always ahead of the times, keen to embrace new ideas and particularly new technology. This included the Internet. Brian involved me in a project to design an online website to sell videos when hardly anyone knew what the Internet was outside academia and defence circles.

His warmth and good humour are known to all. My first formal date involved picking up my now wife (of nearly 40 years) from Brian and Jacky's abode. Brian thrust a Rubik's cube into my hands – this was at a time when no ordinary soul had a clue what a Rubik's cube was. He set me a challenge – you can go out on the date once you've solved the puzzle. After some twenty minutes of frustrated fumbling, he put me out of my misery and let me take my date out. To this day I am still trying to solve the cube without a cheat sheet.

The quality that touched me most was Brian's value of other people. He felt committed to helping everyone around him. You always felt that you mattered to Brian, that people really, truly mattered to him.

Brian had an idea, a concept that he called the Wisdom Bank. He perceived the need for older people to have a channel to pass on their accumulated knowledge and experience to others. This developed into his mentoring of CEOs and business leaders, and such was his flair for this that it grew into a successful business, where CEOs met regularly with other CEOs to learn from and guide each other to solve challenges and problems for their companies. This subsequently turned into a version that supported leaders of non-profits so that they could learn how to make their charities and organizations thrive and truly maximize their ability to help others.

Most of all, Brian was himself a bank of wisdom, inspiring others to be better versions of themselves, to achieve more meaning and satisfaction from daily life, to find a purpose and give more in life.

Brian's encouragement led me to explore

the world of coaching, to study for a Master's degree in Entrepreneurship and to jump at the chance of volunteering for charity work. As I explained to Brian in our very last meeting a couple of months ago, his example of getting involved in assisting a local charity unknowingly led me to a number of opportunities to save lives and make a difference during this last tragic year of Israel's current conflict, with results that are almost unbelievable.

At that last meeting Brian may have been physically weak, but he still had that glimmer of energy and positivity in his eyes, still encouraging me and others to be our best, to share our wisdom, to do good and stand fearless for what we believe.

—Derek (Des) Fattal

Z VIA AND I were privileged to have known Brian for over 25 years as a mentor and friend. It's very hard now to write as if this is all in the past tense but we know that his legacy will endure, not just for us, but for so many people whose lives he touched.

Brian, endowed with a boundless generosity of spirit, had a precious ability to reach out to people and enrich their lives. It gave him great satisfaction to do this, but it was never for his own aggrandisement. Not attracted to religious ritual, Brian always struck us as a very spiritual person. He saw the benefits of other cultures and philosophies of life and was never constrained by insularity. He embraced and was genuinely excited by technological innovation. Years ago, he espoused the advantages of new media such as LinkedIn and Twitter and more recently, the use of artificial intelligence. It was this affinity for new ways of working and communicating which particularly endeared him to young people, starting with his grandchildren, of whom he was so proud. He never patronised or talked down to young people but engaged with them with infectious enthusiasm.

Brian always had time to impart wise counsel to us both, to Zvia about her writing and to me about my legal career. Above all, I will always treasure the times we spent at Lord's and The Oval watch-

ing Test cricket and talking about everything as well as our times together at Tottenham Hotspur – despite the best efforts of our team to continue to delight and to frustrate in equal measure.

Zvia and I were always struck by what a wonderful partnership he had with Jacky and how he supported and encouraged her on her amazing journey to become an ordained chazan. They had many common interests, but also separate ones, and we regarded the space they gave each other to pursue those interests as a model.

Many things will trigger happy memories of Brian. Each time we see a challah loaf, we see Brian tossing it to all the guests seated around their Shabbat table, testing their fielding ability with a twinkle in his eye. A mensch, truly one of a kind.

—Andrew & Zvia Bowman

AT THE LEVAYA and at the shiva services, many tributes were paid to Brian the mentor, Brian the trainer, Brian the face-to-face management consultant who was always happy to work with, advise and inspire charities, boards of management, trustees and non-executive directors. I remember him being very excited and proud when he was invited to become a non-exec. on the board of Central Middlesex Hospital, whose practices were so innovative and effective that it was asked to take over the running of Northwick Park Hospital, a much larger organisation.

Brian's family were fulsome in their praise of Brian the father, grandfather and great-grandfather, but what of Brian the husband and Brian the Jew?

My family has known Jacky and Brian since the summer of 1997, when we abandoned the United Synagogue after the Hugo Gryn Affair. Sue suggested we try EMS, and we joined a month or so before the shul moved to its own, purpose-built building in Stream Lane. Over the years, I have got to know Chazan Jacky quite well, particularly as a chavrutah and as a joint participant in Torah Chat, our Tenach study group, from its inception in 2008. But Brian and I were never

quite on the same wavelength, not least because Brian was always mystified as to how somebody could enjoy going to shul every week, study Torah with like-minded individuals in person or on Zoom and also enjoy watching cricket and American football. For some reason, Brian thought that religious practice and spectator sport were mutually exclusive.

I think that it is fair to say that going to shul was not Brian's thing. Notwithstanding, he made a number of important contributions to Kol Nefesh. First and foremost was his unwavering support for his life-partner, Jacky, as she pursued her studies in Jewish music and liturgy. This culminated in a M.Phil from City University. But more was to come. After many trips across the water to study at the Academy for Jewish Religion in Riverdale, New York State, Jacky gained semichah and became the first female Chazan in this country. This could not have happened without Brian, her devoted and fiercely loyal husband.

And it was Brian who recommended, when Kol Nefesh was in its infancy, that the shul adopt an organisational structure based on the segments of an orange. Everybody would sign up to one or more of the shul's activities – Tefillah, Talmud Torah, etc. – and the kehillah would make executive decisions together at quarterly meetings. No need for a board of management. We are still using Brian's system and it is in fine working order.

Every year, Kol Nefesh has picked a theme pertinent to the Aseret Y'mai Teshuvah, the 10 days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. Come 1st day Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we have always run something in parallel to the main service during Musaf, and it became a tradition to ask Brian to run the session on Yom Kippur. Over a third of shul attendees would join him to receive his pearls of wisdom on positivity, realising your dreams and giving unconditional love. With Jacky, Brian was our community's most respected elder.

And finally, with considerable encouragement and cajoling from Jacky and me, Brian – the man who felt his knowledge of Judaism was quite limited – surprised himself by giving a D'var Torah in shul one Shabbat. Rabbi Joel has a full-time

job as the Head of the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, which means that, for most Shabbatot, we rely on members of the shul to speak on the parashah or haftarah. And Brian stepped up to the plate. Just the once. He did not find it easy, but the great life coach discovered that even he could be empowered to take on a challenge that he doubted he could ever overcome.

—Nabum Gordon

WE KNEW BRIAN for a long time, going back to when services originally took place at Brady Maccabi. Brian was always warm, enthusiastic, engaging and compassionate. And a good listener too, and easy to talk to. Brian was passionate about his work. We will always remember the way he facilitated learning sessions for the community. These often took place during Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur and covered a range of themes, including, for example, sibling rivalry and realising one's dreams, which was so close to his heart.

Other special memories are when we met up with Jacky and Brian on Rabbi Chaim's trips abroad. While enjoying and visiting various places and socialising together Brian was always good company with a sense of fun and mischief.

Right till the end Brian tried so hard to maintain his enthusiasm and love of life.

—Laura & David Ostroff

WHEN WE JOINED Kol Nefesh around 18 years ago, two of the first people we met were Jacky and Brian Chernett. We soon became firm friends, and Jacky saw something special in our eldest, Daniel, which led to her teaching him for his Bar Mitzvah. Every week after his lesson, Daniel would go and spend time with Brian. Whilst Jacky and I worked on content for the European Academy for Jewish Liturgy, Daniel and Brian bonded over sport, and had many conversations about that, as well as about school and life. As Daniel got closer to Brian, so did I; I could talk to him about anything, and apart from his one

major flaw, supporting the wrong north London football team, we barely disagreed on anything.

It wasn't too long before I was attending meetings of the Academy for Chief Executives, one of the many organisations that Brian created. Brian would offer useful business advice, and he soon realised how unhappy I was in my own business life. He took the time to help me exit a toxic business partnership, leaving without any binding ties, and enabling me to start afresh. I could not have done this without Brian. He gave me hours of support, taking me to solicitors and attending numerous meetings until I was able to walk away with my head held high. Brian embodied the word mensch. He was truly one of a kind, and I will miss him immensely.

—James Burns

BRIAN WAS not a regular schule-goer, but a great support and source of advice and wisdom to the Kol Nefesh community. And, of course, a great support to our dear Chazan Jacky through the years of founding two schules, Jacky's studies and the setting up of EAJL. In the early days of Edgware Masorti Synagogue, the office was in their home, and they in their wonderful hospitality hosted many schule events – concerts, baby blessings, fundraisers, planning meetings, etc.

Brian remained active throughout his illness, almost to the end. He continued to offer advice through the Ella Foundation. He was very proud of the model of management he had helped formulate for Kol Nefesh. Last Yom Kippur, during the alternative session, he commended the model of a flat structure involving as many people as possible – the Tapuz, pelachim. It was if he was giving KN his blessing. The last time I saw him, although he was finding it difficult to talk, he reiterated his belief in the structure of the community.

He was a great sports fan, especially cricket and football. He got so much pleasure from his grandsons' sportcast on Tottenham Hotspur, and was thrilled

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when he was recognised in the streets around White Hart Lane where fans would call him Grandpa.

May his memory continue to be a blessing for Jacky, Judy, Rachel, Anna, sons-in-law, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and the community.

—Tanya Novick

**B**RIAN'S OPTIMISM and positivity will be how I remember him. He was interested in people, and generous in his attitude towards others and his belief in what can be achieved. I loved how he was always interested in chatting and curious to understand more. He was a genuine soul, and I will miss him.

—Andrea Grabame

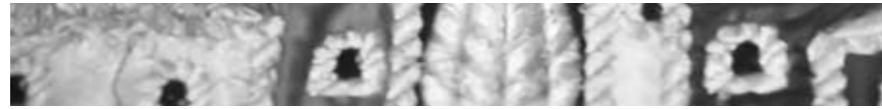
**B**RIAN WAS ONE of the most optimistic people I have ever met. Life's challenges were indisputably opportunities for him – and he brought that optimism into my life at some of the most challenging times I have faced.

He was my mentor at times when I faced career crises... and there seem to have been a few in the last decade! I would turn to him to review and assess the options I faced. His advice and counsel were invaluable. He unlocked my self-belief to pursue a consulting career; he helped me unpick the decisions I had to make about job opportunities.

His gentle, yet persuasive manner brought me strength and his optimism was infectious. Those afternoons in his study, with tea provided by Jacky (!), and circuits of Stonegrove Park, will always be remembered.

His capacity to give chesed and love were uniquely wonderful. I will miss him.

—Jeremy Kelly



## B'nai Mitzvah

*Mazal tov to Ilan Driver and Eli Morris, who celebrated becoming B'nai Mitzvah over the past few months. We're pleased to reprint their thoughtful Divrei Torah.*



### Parashat Noah By Ilan Driver

WELCOME, AND thank you everyone for coming to my Bar Mitzvah.

Today I will be talking about the concept of purity in the story of Noah, and I will also be talking about different aspects of the parasha, such as the Tower of Babel story, and about fragmentation, floods, and climate change.

God told Noah to take one pair of every unclean animal but seven pairs of every clean animal on the ark. The question is, how could Noah distinguish between clean and unclean animals before laws of kashrut and purity were given?

Most classical commentators hold that Noah learnt the Torah / was informed of the distinction; that the reason for seven clean animals was (a) so that clean animals could multiply to suffice for food later on, or (b) so that Noah could sacrifice some of them upon leaving the ark. When I was studying this explanation, I had a question – how could Noah have learnt the Torah if it hadn't been given yet?

One possible answer could be that Noah inferred the distinction based on which species mate only with their own kind. But Noah had to rely on divine guidance to know which birds could enter the ark.

Malbim (who was a rabbi, master of Hebrew grammar, and commentator) suggests that Noah wasn't concerned about unclean birds because there were none of them in his home. He had impure animals that would be used for ploughing and riding, but unclean birds – birds of prey – would not be in his possession. He wanted to take the clean birds on the ark so that they could multiply and populate the land; if they were few, he wouldn't be able to use them for his needs, like having the birds fly out to check if the flood was over.

God says “take for yourself”, rather than just “take”. Why specify “yourself”? God is telling Noah there is a limit to how many of his own flocks he can take onto the ark. Malbim explains that Noah had many animals in his possession and that if he were to take them all, there would be no space in the ark for species that would come to the ark of their own accord once the flood began. This is supported by Ibn Ezra (who was one of the most distinguished Jewish biblical commentators and philosophers of the Middle Ages), who notes the phrase *yavo'u elecha l'hachayot* (“they will come to you in order to survive”). He comments, “They will come by themselves. Noah therefore did not have to search for them on islands; neither did he have to hunt for all sorts of fowl”.

My answer now is that even though the Torah or the Ten Commandments or all of that hadn't been formally codified, Noah was clearly living in accordance with these laws. This week's parasha began by telling us “Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God.” Ibn Ezra explains “righteous

man” as righteous in his deeds, i.e.: Noah does good deeds, which are rooted in the Torah.

Apart from discussing commentaries on the Torah, I'd like to talk about the contemporary relevance of the story of Noah and the flood. Flooding, sadly, has become a repetitive and devastating occurrence today and may get worse due to global warming and climate change. There have been increasing amounts of flooding in Central Europe and far beyond. One example is Bangladesh, where 80% of the country is in floodplain. The floods have become increasingly frequent; in September, the UN reported that over 18 million people in Bangladesh had been affected by severe monsoon conditions, with more than 1.2 million families trapped as flash floods submerged vast areas of the country's east and southeast. To prevent this, we need to work together and stop global warming by getting rid of factories that produce harmful chemicals that get released into the environment.

This requirement for cooperation ties in with another aspect of Parashat Noah: the Tower of Babel narrative. At the start of the story, all people are working together to build the tower, with one purpose and one language – *safah echat*. God then divides humans into several ethnic groups and languages, and disperses them all over the planet to stop them from constructing the tower to the skies. In other words, fragmentation. God prohibited humanity from cooperating to achieve a single objective by doing this, instead forming nations with distinct identities, customs, and pursuits.

Does this mean that God shares some of the blame for the current state of nonexistent international collaboration to combat flooding and more widespread climate change? And, if so, has God breached his promise to Noah never to flood the world again?

Unlike Noah, who is told by God how to respond to the flood and may even have received elements of the Torah, we do not



### Parashat Terumah By Eli Morris

HELLO, AND WELCOME!

Today is a very special shabbat (and not just because it's my B'Mitzvah)! We leyned from three Sifrei Torah, each for a different reason. Firstly, we continued reading from where we left off last Shabbat, with this week's parashah: Terumah. In this portion, God instructs the Children of Israel on how to build the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and asks the Israelites to donate their valuables towards it (more on that later).

But today is also a special Shabbat, Shabbat Shekalim, and so we read a special Maftir, which tells us about a compulsory payment of half a shekel from each of the people in Israel (with specialities), in order to count them for a census. This money

receive divine direction to show us how to respond to the threat of climate change. Instead, we must figure out for ourselves how to save animal species and how to work together, despite competing individual interests.

As I become a Jewish adult, I feel an urge to help with climate change. Ways in which I can do this include: Turning lights off when they're not needed; recycling waste responsibly; supporting animal / habitat conservation by donating money or volunteering; using electric cars or public transportation; and avoiding the overuse of packaging. For example, I recently opened a small package that had an excessive and unnecessary amount of bubble-wrap in it.

The negative consequences of fragmentation are more difficult to deal with for me. On the one hand, fragmentation has positive consequences. It lets different cultures meet and share their different ways, and enables us to learn, listen and discuss different approaches to problems. On the other hand, cultural difference sometimes gets in the way of peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding. In my life, I see fragmentation when people are left out. I would like to help people who feel excluded or who don't feel like they belong, so that they too are valued and can work together with all of us to make the world a better place.

In conclusion, the issues in my parasha – fragmentation, purity and floods – have taught me the importance of choices. The choices we make today have an effect on the future. We can learn from the past and change the future with our decisions.

I would like to thank Simon for helping me with my Dvar Torah and with my leyning. I would also like to thank all the people who flew long distances to be here today, and finally I would like to thank my family – for all their support and for organising this very special day. Thank you and Shabbat Shalom. ■

was also used for the Mishkan, and later, in the Haftarah, we read about donations given for the repair of the Temple.

In between the leyning for Terumah and Shabbat Shekalim, there was a special portion of leyning because today is also Rosh Chodesh – this was my bit! In this D'var Torah I would like to focus on the Rosh Chodesh leyning, six verses from Parashat Pinchas, in which Hashem told Moshe to tell the Children of Israel how to give sacrifices to Him, specifically on Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh.

In verses 9 and 11 of Chapter 28, the Torah says that the animals used for the sacrifices have to be “temimim”. What does “temimim” mean and why should animal sacrifices be

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“temimim”? Rabbi Dr Hertz translates “temimim” as “without blemish”, which I interpreted as meaning “perfect”.

This piqued my interest because why should sacrifices be perfect, when it's not as if we're perfect! When I first thought about this question, the answer that popped into my mind was, since Hashem is perceived to be perfect, maybe He wants His sacrifices to reflect on Him, so they need to be perfect too.

Another idea that I had was that since people are not perfect, and don't have the capacity to be perfect, then we shouldn't sacrifice ourselves. The Torah is very much against human sacrifice, as we can tell from verses in Acharei Mot and Kedoshim. Here God tells the children of Israel that they must not offer their children up to Molech, a Pagan god. The penalty for it is death for themselves!

The Torah tells us that child sacrifice to Molech was a ritual carried out by the people who lived in the land of Canaan before the Israelites. If the Children of Israel started practising these rituals as well, they might soon assimilate with those people, worshipping idols and losing faith in Hashem.

Instead, the children of Israel need to be different. They need to offer specific sacrifices on specific days, using grain and wine and animals.

Which brings us back to our question – why should the animals need to be “temimim”?

Well, there's multiple answers, but I think a simple one is that it's possible for animals to BE perfect, by which I mean physically perfect. People might try to be spiritually perfect, but animals aren't spiritual beings. The only imperfections animals can really have are physical ones.

In the book of Malachi, the last of the 12 minor prophets, the prophet criticizes the Israelites for offering sick and injured animals to God. He asks the people if they would ever treat a human ruler that way? Of course they wouldn't, because they would be too scared of the consequences! So how much more important is it that the people sacrifice the very best animals they have to Hashem?

The clue is in the name – this is meant to be a “sacrifice”. One of the definitions of sacrifice is: “giving up (something valued)

for the sake of other considerations”. If you don't care about something, it's not a true sacrifice, because you never valued it in the first place. But if you value it and still give it away for the “sake of other considerations”, then you are carrying out a true sacrifice.

We see this same idea in today's Parashat Terumah. Here, Hashem asks for “terumah” (meaning gifts or offerings) from the Israelites, such as gold, precious stones and spices. These would have been very valuable possessions for the Israelites. But these sacrifices are not compulsory. Hashem only wants donations from those whose “heart makes them willing”.

The Mishneh Torah also teaches us the value of HOW you give. In the Ladder of Charity, Rambam (Maimonides) places “giving sadly” (or unwillingly) right at the bottom of the ladder and tells us that it is better to give gladly, even if we are not giving as much as is needed!

Which brings us back to “temimim”, because sometimes the Torah does use this word to describe people. In Devarim, chapter 18, verse 13, the Torah says: “you shall be temimim with the Lord, your God”. And here, temimim doesn't necessarily mean perfect – Rabbi Dr Hertz translates it as “whole-hearted”. So, temimim might not just be about the “what”, it could be about the way you approach it.

So, we've learnt that to give a “temimim” sacrifice, it's important both what you give and how you give it, and that's really important for my life right now, and my entire childhood. I've grown up with people making sacrifices for me, for example, my mum! She's given up time, money and experiences for me, making me feel like the luckiest person in this world. I plan to take inspiration from her and sacrifice my own time and money for other people as well.

I would also like to take this time to think of my late father. He was a mensch, a person who could do no wrong – allegedly – and I'm really upset he couldn't be here today. I have actually leyned the Rosh Chodesh portion, just as he did for his bar mitzvah. In his memory, I would love to sacrifice money and time to the British Heart Foundation.

Shabbat shalom, and thank you for taking the time out of your day to come here and listen! ■



### The Yellow Candle Project

The Yellow Candle Project, managed by Maccabi GB, is a way to remember Jewish Holocaust victims on Yom HaShoah (this year, 23rd April). The candles are accompanied by cards bearing details of someone who perished in the Holocaust.

Yellow Candles can be purchased directly from [www.yellowcandleuk.org](http://www.yellowcandleuk.org), at a cost of £3.50 each plus £2.25 p&p for up to six candles. Kol Nefesh also still has some candles available at the shul. Please take home what you want, then pay £3.50 per candle via our administrator, Elaine White ([admin@kolnefesh.org.uk](mailto:admin@kolnefesh.org.uk)). Thank you.

## Ce N'est Pas de L'Hébreu!

By Esther Shouby

In the last issue of this magazine, I wrote about my childhood in Iraq and my family's early years in the new State of Israel in the 1950s. Here, I want to tell a later part of my story: the years I spent as a Hebrew teacher at Paul Valéry University in Montpellier, in southern France. I spent three years there, under the framework of a cultural exchange scheme between France and Israel. I don't recall the precise years, but it would have been in the late 1970s, some time after the Yom Kippur War.

While I was able to work in France thanks to an Israeli–French agreement, I wasn't there as a formal representative of Israel. Still, I was treated as if I represented Israel, and also Jews more broadly, by the French people I encountered. Given the alarming levels of antisemitism in France today, you might think this was a bad thing. At that time and place, though, Israel and Israelis were liked and admired. Let me give you three examples.

In the first case, a short time after I began working at the university I was approached by one of the other lecturers, who asked me where I was from. When I said “Israel”, his reply was “Oh, I envy you.” I was astonished. With all the troubles facing Israel at the time, a tiny island in a sea of hostile Arab states, what could he, a Frenchman, possibly see fit to envy in me, an Israeli? When I looked at him in surprise, he said, “If I were in your place, I could be proud of my country.” I still didn't quite understand, so he explained further: “Your country, you fought and stood your ground. My country, we gave up.” He wasn't talking about World War II, as you might think, but the loss of French control over North Africa (Tunisia and Morocco in the 1950s, Algeria in 1962), and even more, the humiliation of the French in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis of 1956. Basically, my fellow lecturer envied me being Israeli because my country, but not his, had stood up to the Arabs. This was an attitude I encountered throughout my time in France.

The second example occurred one year on Yom Kippur. I was in synagogue, and had been fasting. I felt faint, but was worried about causing a commotion in synagogue. I remembered I had a friend, not Jewish, who lived not far from the synagogue. There was no way to contact her in advance ... this was at a time when very few people had telephones in the house. So I took a chance and knocked on her door. She welcomed me and offered me some tea and a bite to eat. But she didn't join me in a cup of tea. I asked why, and she said: “out of solidarity with the Jewish people.” This was again just one example out of many I could have chosen, where French people showed a positive attitude and disposition towards Jews in general, as well as Israelis in particular.

The third example I want to offer concerned my doctor in France. He had some fears about my health at the time (these turned out to be unfounded), and I was worried that I wouldn't be able to access the needed treatment (I was unsure about my entitlements under the French health system). He told me not to worry – he would take care of everything. This doctor had lived in France for years, but by birth he was Vietnamese, and this was around the time that Israel took in several hundred Vietnamese boat people fleeing the 1975 Communist takeover of Vietnam. For this French-Vietnamese doctor, Israel was a protector, one of the good guys, in a world where his people were the ones suffering.

I must say here that the attitudes I encountered in Montpellier may not have been common throughout France. Montpellier, and southern France generally, was home to a lot of Pieds-Noir – French and other European people born and raised in Algeria when it was under French rule, and forced

to leave after Algeria gained independence in 1962. They felt deeply alienated from French culture, and were angry and resentful at having to leave their homes and property in North Africa. So they had great sympathy for Israel, and even for Jews *qua* Jews, as they saw our conflict with the Arabs in religious terms.

I'd like to share another example, a slightly different one, which also speaks to an experience that was not necessarily uncommon among French people during those years. There was a young woman, maybe 19 or 20, who came to me for private Hebrew lessons. She worked near where I lived, and would come to my home after work hours. This woman wasn't Jewish, but she really seemed to want to learn Hebrew, or at least to spend time with a Jewish teacher of Hebrew. She wasn't well-educated and had no gift for languages, so why? It turned out that her family had been ostracized after the Second World War because her father was accused of collaborating with the Germans, and even worse, of informing to the Nazi authorities on Jews in hiding and members of the resistance. This young woman didn't have any special love for Jews or Israel – but she had a deep-seated need to purify her family's name. She was a particularly sad case, and while I didn't enjoy teaching her I did feel sorry for her.

Unfortunately, after I left France I lost contact with my friends and students there. But I did get back in touch with

*Continued on page 30.*



*Paul Valéry University  
in Montpellier.*



# Purim: Connections and Reflections

By Nahum Gordon

*On Thursday, 6 March, I attended a lovely simchah (Sheva B'rachot for Katie and Harry). I took the opportunity to have a chat with our esteemed editor, as she had only recently returned from Israel. Meira reminded me that, many moons ago, I had suggested an article on Purim, a chag that is overlooked as our bi-annual magazines tend to focus, not surprisingly, on Pesach and the Yamim Nora'im.*

*Fortuitously, I was delivering the D'var Torah on the 15th of March, the day after Purim, and the chag had been uppermost in my mind (my D'var Torah is reproduced below). Two days after Meira prompted me, some people who had yahrzeit (and we had a lot) mentioned in passing their mixed reactions to Purim. I should have followed this up over Kiddush but, if I may speculate, their ambivalence might have been due in part to their concerns over the plight of the remaining hostages or the abandonment of a democratic country by a former ally that used to be the strongest bulwark against Communist dictatorships. Add the distinct humour surrounding Purim, much of which stems from the text, and you could hardly have blamed our speakers if they had decided to give the chag a miss. Halachically, that option was never available. All of us were obligated to listen to Megillat Esther being leyned. Why?*

The challenge I set myself for today was to connect Purim to this week's sidrah, Ki Tisa. The Purim story is probably not historical, but that's immaterial. What makes Purim relevant and important is its message, particularly for Jews who live in the Diaspora, such as us. After 7 October 2023, Israelis may feel that they are more vulnerable than us and that they face a greater existential threat. That is perfectly understandable. However, the Purim narrative is about Jewish communities that chose not to return to Israel and how, through serendipity, they were not exterminated. Indeed, they went much further and nullified the menace. I suspect that's pure fantasy, but survival seems a good enough reason to celebrate.

What makes the story in Megillat Esther so chilling is how easily all of the Jews in the Persian empire could have been

wiped out, even though they had integrated into Persian society. How do I know that they had tried to fit in? Just look at the names of the principal Jewish players. Mordechai is not a Hebrew name. Its origin is Babylonian. It can be linked to the gods Merodach or Marduk. Merodach was an alternative name for the chief Canaanite god Baal. Marduk was the chief god of the Babylonian pantheon. Esther is not a Hebrew name. Either it's Persian, derived from the word "stara" meaning star, or it's Babylonian, derived from the name of the ancient goddess Ishtar, who was worshipped by the Sumerians, Assyrians and Babylonians. In Phoenicia, she was known as As-tarte.

One lesson from the Shoah is that it makes no difference how far we are willing to integrate or even assimilate into the gentile societies we are born into. We are always outsiders. What does Haman say to Achashverosh? "There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples of your realm, whose customs/practices are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws..." So, our joy at surviving should be tempered. We must always remember that antisemitism is deep-rooted, universal and eternal. Our mission, if we choose to accept it, is to be forever vigilant.

What's remarkable about our culture is that we should not gloat over the deaths of our enemies, a principle that we observe during the Seder. Some say it is also observed on Purim as we don't say Hallel. But on that basis, we should not recite Hallel on Chanukah. More on that chag shortly. What does seem to be true is that, at Purim, there is considerable humour in the Megillah and frivolity in our actions. It seems as if we are laughing in the face of adversity.

If we can't cheer the demise of our foes, can we at least applaud Esther and Mordechai? To quote the Dead Sea Scrolls, can we rejoice that the Children of Light

prevailed over the Children of Darkness? How about the triumph of the tribe of Benjamin over our oldest enemy, the Amalekites? I doubt that any of you would suggest that, but the clues are all there in Megillat Esther. You just have to spot them and understand their significance.

If there is more to the Megillah than the superficial, then today's parashah, Ki Tisa, is also intriguing. Moses wants to see God. There's an alternative 10 Commandments and the creation of a Golden Calf threatens to consume almost all of the Israelites. One tribe remains impervious to the Calf's charms and resolves the crisis in a manner with which its progenitor would have been most familiar. I am talking about the tribe of Levi. Incidentally, it was only after I had written the first of 30 drafts of this D'var Torah that I discovered that Alison wanted me to speak today because I am a member of the tribe of Levi.

My connection between Purim and the Golden Calf is the loss of life which secures the tribes of Benjamin and Levi their objectives. Through Purim and Ki Tisa, Benjamin and Levi demonstrate that they are the principal exceptions to my rule that the leadership of the Israelites will be shared by the offspring of the two sons that are blessed by Jacob above all others, namely Judah (the fourth son) and Joseph (the eleventh). During the Exodus and in Canaan, Joseph will be represented primarily by the exploits of the descendants of his younger son, Ephraim.

I start this brief exposition by taking you back to Jacob's farewell in B'reishit Chapter 49. Imagine the scene – all 12 sons standing round their father's bed, as he is dying. Jacob addresses each of them in descending order of their birth. In keeping with a theme that runs through the Tanakh, primogeniture is ignored. Reuben, the oldest son, is dismissed because of the manner in which he reminded his father that he still had a wife, Leah,

after his favourite wife, Rachel, had died. Leah was Reuben's mother. He was just looking after her interests. As the oldest son, Reuben should have been the next head of the family but he is discarded. His disgruntled and frustrated descendants fail to wrest control from Moses and Aaron during the Korach revolt, and Deborah the judge criticises the tribe for its absence when her commander, Barak, engages the superior forces of the Canaanite general, Sisera. Located east of the River Jordan, Reuben disappears from the Biblical narrative, presumably assimilated by neighbouring peoples.

The second and third sons, Shimon and Levi, are cursed because of their propensity for violence. They murder all the adult males in Shechem before extricating their abducted sister Dinah. Jacob is not upset by their lack of morals. He's worried that their action might spur a vendetta by other Canaanite centres. It doesn't, probably because the other Canaanite populations are too frightened to retaliate. You mess with Jacob's sons at your peril!

In Egypt, Joseph imprisons Shimon, probably because he was the most eager to murder his younger brother when Joseph was only 17. Shimon and Levi, allies at Shechem, are pitted against each other when Pinchas, who will become the third Cohen Gadol (High Priest), murders Zimri, a prince of Shimon, for consorting brazenly with a Midianite woman. The divine plague that had broken out depletes the tribe of Shimon more than any other. Shimon is not even mentioned in Moses' valedictory address and is not given any land by Joshua. The tribe of Judah takes pity on Shimon and donates some space in the heart of its territory. Presumably, Shimon is absorbed into Judah and disappears as a distinct clan.

And Levi? Just as Jacob prophesied, Levi is "scattered" with no discrete land of its own, but its presence in every Israelite town is deliberate because it has been entrusted with supervising all sacrifices, and that includes controlling the Mishkan (Tabernacle). Through Zadok, Solomon's

Cohen Gadol, the tribe of Levi will run the First Temple. And Ezra, who will rebuild the Temple with Nehemiah, is a descendant of Zadok.

However, no sooner have we finished Sefer B'reishit, we discover that God has appointed Moses and his brother Aaron to lead the tribes out of Egypt. This is surprising because they are from Levi, and that tribe's penchant for violence has not abated. Moses murders an Egyptian taskmaster with premeditation. Why? He was a prince of the royal court. He had the authority and the power to choose a different option. He flees from Pharaoh's wrath, and his temporary sojourn in Midian sees him marrying Zipporah and having two children with her. However, his

One lesson from the Shoah is that it makes no difference how far we integrate into the societies we are born into. We are always outsiders.

short fuse will eventually disqualify him from entering Canaan.

I mentioned that Pinchas executes Zimri. He does so without consulting Moses. Was there no alternative? However, the question is moot, for Pinchas is praised and rewarded by God. His precipitate act halts the plague sent by God that would have continued to ravage the people. And in this week's sidrah, after persuading God not to wipe out the people for demanding and then dancing round a Golden Calf, Moses becomes so angry that *he* exacts retribution on the people before God does. He orders his own tribe, Levi, who are the only ones to rally to his side, to go on the rampage. Circa 3,000 men die that day. Indeed, it this action that demonstrates to God that the tribe of Levi is loyal and can be entrusted with looking after the sacrifices, the Mishkan and the Temple.

What differentiates all these deaths from the Shechem massacre is that now Levi is zealous on behalf of God. Justifiable

homicide. The loss of life is for the greater good. The end justifies the means. Through this lens, Chanukah is an annual thanksgiving for Levi's blood-letting. Chanukah recalls the successful battles of one family of Cohanim over the Seleucids. But that family will go much further. Not only will they occupy illegally the position of Cohen Gadol, but they will also create a monarchic dynasty, the Hasmonean kings, thereby usurping the role that had been prophesied by Jacob for Judah and possibly for Joseph.

And what of Benjamin? What did Jacob have to say about his youngest son, born as his beloved wife Rachel lay dying? And what happened to that tribe? Jacob describes Benjamin as a wolf that will tear its prey apart. In the morning, it will devour and in the evening it will apportion the booty. That last phrase will prove to be prophetic, as you will see in a moment. Modern commentators seem to ignore it but some of the medieval ones apprehended its import. At the end of the Book of Judges, Benjamin is almost wiped out in a civil war waged by all the other tribes. Its forces are outnumbered over 15 to 1, and only 3 percent of its fighting men survive the slaughter. Even though it is the smallest tribe, numerically and geographically, God will choose Saul, a Benjaminite, to be the first king of all Israel.

Saul's reign will be a difficult one. He will always be found wanting by Samuel and presumably by God. He will lose the right to establish a dynasty. And then, Samuel and God will abandon him when he makes two crucial mistakes after being ordered to annihilate the Amalekites. First, he spares the life of King Agag, which apparently was the correct, royal protocol at that time, and second, he allows his troops to bring back the best of the cattle and sheep as booty because he was afraid of losing their loyalty – i.e., Saul was more concerned about not upsetting his army than he was about upsetting God!

During David's reign, Jerusalem becomes

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the capital of all Israel and the place where the First Temple will be built by his youngest son, Solomon. Jerusalem is located inside the territory of Benjamin. This is a strategic and political decision as Benjamin's land is a buffer zone. It separates David's tribe, Judah, from the tribes that will eventually form the Northern Kingdom. They suspect, with justification, that David has scant respect for Saul's achievements and for his family. Rightly, they never trust David and he does not trust them. When the move to depose David finally arrives, as it must, it is instigated not by the remnants of Saul's family, nor by Benjamin, nor by any of the Northern tribes – but from within his own household, by his favourite son, who persuades David's own tribe of Judah to rebel. How deliciously ironic!

Saul's reputation and that of his tribe is redeemed at Purim. Megillat Esther tells us that Mordechai is from Benjamin, and traces his truncated genealogy back to a man called Kish. There are only a few men in the Bible with that name, and the first is the father of King Saul. Mordechai's rival in the Persian royal court for the role of Svangali (or Joseph if you want to be more charitable) is Haman, an Agagite, a descendant of the king spared by Saul. By contrast, Haman is shown no mercy. His life is forfeit, as are those of his entire family and his followers. Esther persuades her husband, the witless and easily manipulated Achashverosh, to allow Jews across his empire to rise up and liquidate their enemies. Over 75,000 are killed, and the Megillah tells us not once, not twice, but three times that the Jews refrained from "laying their hands on the spoil", i.e., they took no booty.

When reading the Megillah, you may have noticed that God does not make an appearance. There may be a veiled allusion – "Relief and deliverance will arise from another place" – but I suspect that God was omitted deliberately. In the Book of Samuel, God always rebuffed Saul the Benjaminite. Did the author of the Megillah conclude that there was little point in Mordechai the Benjaminite or his first cousin Esther asking God for help? The story suggests that they placed their faith in their own abilities.

You could legitimately question my interpretation by pointing out that when the Jews discover that Haman's plan has received royal assent, they react by "fasting, weeping and wailing" and wearing "sackcloth and ashes". Are these not acts of religiosity? Are the Jews not crying out to God for salvation? For some reason, the author was very careful to avoid using words like "praying" and "God".

Megillat Esther may have been considered theologically suspect. Every book in the Tanakh bar one has been found, either in fragments or complete, amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls. These texts, some of which date back to the 3rd century BCE, comprise the library compiled by Essene or Sadducean priests at Qumran. No prizes for guessing which book has yet to be authenticated conclusively in the Dead Sea archive.

Is my explanation for God's absence at Purim heretical? The best response I can offer you was that uttered by Francis Urquhart MP in the 1990 TV series, House of Cards: "Now, you might very well think that but, of course, I couldn't possibly comment." ■

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one student, many years later – and I have Kol Nefesh to thank for it. In December 2018, Kol Nefesh invited me to speak to the community about my family's experiences leaving Iraq for Israel, to mark Israel's Memorial Day for the Expulsion of Jews from Arab Lands. Soon after, I was contacted by the administrator to say someone in France wanted my address. It turns out this was a former student who had been searching for me online with no success. So this was a happy turn of events.

I haven't written here much about my actual teaching work in France. This is interesting in itself. In France, the strategy for teaching languages is to focus on grammar. Knowing the rules is considered key to knowing the language. In Israel, teaching Hebrew was a more rough-and-ready affair. Israel in the early days had to absorb streams of new immigrants, who needed to be integrated quickly. So the strategy for teaching the language was to get people out speaking; the grammar and rules could come later, if at all. That was the approach I followed in France. So my students, for the most part, learned Hebrew quickly and easily.


In France, when something is particularly difficult or hard to understand, people say "C'est de l'hébreu" (the parallel for English speakers is probably "It's all Greek to me!"). I think my students and I proved that expression quite wrong (and indeed, the Israeli system is how I myself learned French and, of course, English). I would change the expression and say, "Ce n'est pas de l'hébreu!" But that's for another day. ■

With thanks to Meira Ben-Gad for help writing this article.

**Kol Nefesh Word Corner**

At Kol Nefesh, a *pelach* (plural *pelachim*; Hebrew for "segment") is a committee or working group.

*Tapuz* ("orange") is our word for a community meeting, when all the *pelachim* come together.





## From the Convenors

DEAR FRIENDS,

Since our last issue of this magazine, our kehillah has undergone many changes, the most significant being our sudden departure from Jack Block House, our home for the past 15 years. Alongside these unsettling changes, we also mourn the passing of two dear members, Lilian Rubin and Brian Chernett, whose memory we hold close.

As we prepare to celebrate 25 years as a community, Brian's dedication to building and strengthening our kehillah brings the theme of legacy to mind. We have found great joy in celebrating the B'nei Mitzvah of Ilan Driver and Eli Morris, as well as the Aufruf of Harry Kelly and Katie Maguire. Witnessing the next generation called to the Torah has been truly heart-warming.

Our project for the upcoming months is to think of ways of developing and growing the community, collectively working to become more inclusive of families, and maintaining our exceptional service leadership standards, for which KN is so well known. Having Rabbi Shuki Zehavi from the Conservative Yeshiva and rabbinical student Tim Motz visit us and teach has been wonderful. We look forward to having other rabbinical students come and teach for us and form relationships with future rabbis in the movement. With new leadership at the Masorti office, our small community continues to punch well above its weight. We believe it is essential that our community take part in discussions about shaping the movement's future.

Our most pressing concern this summer is finding a new home for our community. We have received a great deal of positive feedback about our current lease at Hyman Hall, but sadly, this is unlikely to be a permanent arrangement. Moving will not be easy, as finding a space that meets all our needs and remains affordable will require compromise. We trust in the inge-

nuity and problem-solving abilities of our members and extend our deepest gratitude to the Building Search Committee, chaired by Ian Abrahams, as well as to all of you for your honest feedback on our trial Shabbatot.

Not having a permanent home has made Jay reflect on the Magid section of the Haggadah, particularly the *bikurim* declaration from the beginning of Parashat Ki Tavo (Deuteronomy 26:5–8). This succinct retelling of our exodus from Egypt begins with the well-known phrase *Arami oved avi*, commonly translated as "my father was a wandering Aramean". Traditional commentaries, however, offer an alternative reading: "An Aramean sought to destroy my father". Regardless of how we interpret Jacob's journey to Egypt, many commentators (Rashi, Ritva, Abudraham) note that our survival was sustained by our unity. As a small group, we did not disperse, assimilate, or abandon our ways. Rather, we maintained our unique identity through a steadfast commitment to our traditions (Rashbam, Rashbatz, Ya'akov ben Yakar). This remarkable resilience and togetherness should inspire us today. While we may not yet have a permanent home, if we hold on to our traditions, customs, communal spirit and values, we will not only endure but grow stronger through this shared experience.

On 26 April, we will hold a rededication service at Hyman Hall, marking 25 years since our inauguration. The weekly Parasha will be Shemini, which describes the dedication of the Mishkan following the command to build a sanctuary. The Mishkan was a portable sanctuary and became the focal point for the people as a place of assembly and holiness. We hope you can join us for this very special service and that we find our own Mishkan soon.

—Siobhan (Shibby) Allen & Jay Schlesinger



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