

OUR

CONGREGATION

Issue 719



MAY/JUNE 2022 | IYAR/SIVAN 5782

News and views from
Belsize Square Synagogue

FROM PESACH TO SHAVUOT

On fruit and transformation

Thought Shavuot was all about dairy foods? Think again,
says **Rabbi Gabriel Botnick**

When you think of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, what do you picture as the forbidden fruit they ate? You might imagine an apple though we have no true idea what grew on the Tree of Knowledge. However, history has provided plenty of hypotheses.

Our sages have suggested the fruit might have been a grape, reasoning that nothing brings on more trouble than wine. Or it might have been a fig, since immediately upon eating it, Adam and Eve saw they were naked and made loin cloths out of nearby fig leaves.

But the most interesting hypothesis I've read about the forbidden fruit is that it was wheat. One might dismiss this as wheat is

not a fruit, but we must remember we're dealing with rabbinic logic here!

In ancient times there were two main grains that were widely cultivated: barley and wheat. Even though it is hearty and healthy, it's not so easy on the stomach, so our ancestors avoided making barley into bread. Instead, they used it for stews, beer or animal feed. Wheat was held in much higher esteem, as it could be ground into a very fine flour for making easily digested bread.

Our sages also teach that the first solid food most children ate was wheat bread, which their parents would feed them once they started talking. This suggests a direct connection between wheat and knowledge, so sages identify the forbidden fruit as this grain.

But the symbolism of wheat and barley goes even deeper. In ancient Israel, farmers would plant wheat and barley seeds in the autumn, just in time to be nourished by the winter rains. However, the

barley grows faster and would be harvested in March or April, while the wheat would be harvested in May or June. In the Torah, the barley harvest is associated with Pesach as the Israelites would make an offering of barley to God then. Fifty days later, the Israelites would celebrate Shavuot and bring an offering of bread, made of the finest flour from their wheat harvest.

Of course, the importance of Pesach and Shavuot extends beyond the agrarian, as they remind us of the two most central events in our people's history. Pesach celebrates our liberation from enslavement and the birth of our people, and Shavuot celebrates the day God gave us the Torah and we attained knowledge.

Shavuot's association with wheat, a grain so tied up with knowledge, led our sages to teach that 'without wheat, there is no Torah; without Torah, there is no wheat'.

The 50-day journey that takes us from Pesach to Shavuot is called the Omer. The essence of this period is to see ourselves transform from being merely free animals into cognitive humans – finding our humanity through the wisdom of the Torah.

On this journey from Pesach to Shavuot, I encourage you to manifest your fullest potential as a human. And if you find yourself stuck, just remember Adam and Eve, who taught us that even the simplest of acts (like eating an apple) can prove to be truly transformative.

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NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Dear readers,

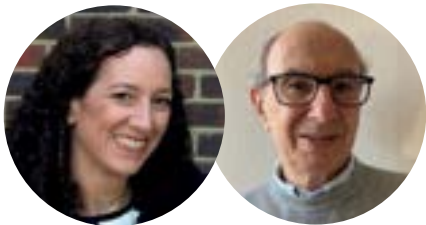
We are pleased to introduce you to a new look for *Our Congregation*. We hope you'll find it attractive, accessible and an interesting read. As this is the first issue in our new design, we'd welcome your feedback on the layout as we expect to refine the look over the next few issues.

We are always keen to receive stimulating articles and photos that will be of interest to Belsize Square members, so if you have something to share, whether it's a piece about a fascinating but forgotten event from history, a book or theatre review, a recipe with a family story or a favourite Belsize memory, please do send it to us.

If you'd like to 'go green' and receive *Our Congregation* as a PDF by email in future instead of in print, please email adam@synagogue.org.uk.

With best wishes,

Alex Antscherl (Editor) and
David Horwell (Associate Editor)



COMMUNITY NEWS

NEW MEMBERS

We extend a cordial welcome to:
Orly Orbach with children Leon & Oren
Noah Salama

BIRTHS

Congratulations and mazal tov to:
Frankie & Daniel Morgenthau on the birth
of their son Rafi

BAT MITZVAH

Mazal tov to:
Jessica, daughter of Tamara Moss,
who celebrates her Bat Mitzvah on Saturday 11 June

STONESETTING

Hazel Kay on Sunday 15 May at 10.00am at
Edgwarebury Lane Cemetery

SYNAGOGUE SNAPSHOT

Lilian Levy

Editorial assistant, AJR Journal



Photo from *Life Before the Holocaust: Portraits of Character*
© Jono David

What is your favourite thing about your work?

At the ripe old age of 82 I didn't really expect to be working any longer but, in fact, I do have a job, albeit in a voluntary capacity. My grandiose title is 'Editorial Assistant' for the AJR Journal, the monthly publication of the Association of

Jewish Refugees. My favourite aspect of the work is gathering in and selecting the diverse articles which are submitted and editing them as necessary. The Editor is highly talented but she does not have a refugee background so my input is largely connected with ascertaining what could be of interest to readers with refugee antecedents.

What is the hardest part of your job?

Meeting the monthly copy date deadlines can often be challenging, especially when some of the older contributors are not computer literate.

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

I would love to have been a professional calligraphy artist. In the event, calligraphy has been a wonderful hobby.

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

I came to Belsize Square (then the New Liberal Jewish Congregation) in 1946, at the age of six, because my aunt (with whom I was living at the time) was a member and felt I should attend the Cheder. In fact, I far preferred the Synagogue's youth group, the Phoenix, which met every Saturday evening. Lifelong friendships were formed there, and ultimately also several marriages, including my own to Herbert.

What's your favourite festival?

Succot has always been a great favourite. My family had a makeshift Succah at home, which the children decorated, and then we came to Shul to help with the decoration of that one too.

Where do you like to sit in shul?

My seat of preference is up in the choir loft, where I love to sing when the Community Choir is having one of its 'outings'.

CREATING ARCHIVES

Keeping family memories for posterity

**Eve Hersov, Belsize Square Synagogue
Community Care Co-ordinator**

It is so important for Belsize Square Synagogue members to think about materials and items that they have in their own homes that they may not realise are of historic value. Sometimes we do not understand what we possess. Many of us have source materials for research that tell more than just the story of our own families, but speak for others and strengthen the connections of generation to generation. One satisfying way to preserve the importance of what we have is by loaning or giving our family objects or papers to organisations like the Wiener Holocaust Library, to university libraries or to museums, where they will be available for others to access and to appreciate this cultural and historic legacy.

A recent donation to the Wiener Library brought the value of preserving such materials into sharp focus for me. Just before her hundredth birthday and less than a month before the Covid lockdown, one of our members, Brigitte Flynn, moved into a residential home. It was a smooth transition, but one that set various wheels in motion. For many years the Flynn family had been assisted by Suk Man, a second-generation Chinese woman from Borehamwood. Suk and I had worked closely with Brigitte and her daughter Enid in discussing Brigitte's care needs and organising her move.

During the autumn of 2020, Suk began the task of sorting through the contents of Brigitte's flat. Opening the drawers of the family sideboard, Suk became aware that this piece of furniture held the stories of both Brigitte's and her late husband Arthur's

families – the Hanfs and the Flynns. Being from a culture that reveres ancestors, Suk's antennae went up. She phoned me and described the treasure trove of letters, sketchbooks, official papers and countless loose photographs and albums, going back over 100 years. And there were also books, some of which we would later learn were written by well-known family members. Suk instinctively understood that what was assembled had enormous value and needed a new home.

I thought that the Wiener Library might be a perfect home for this family archive. But there was no doubt that the pandemic would have an impact on the transfer of the materials. Suk first brought the materials to our synagogue for safekeeping. Then it took many months for me to arrange a joint visit by Toby Simpson, Director of the Wiener Holocaust Library, and Michael Berkowitz, Professor of Modern Jewish History at University College London. But before their visit, each time that I took even a brief look through some of the materials stored at the shul, I understood that I was the temporary guardian of a real treasure.

As Suk systematically cleared Brigitte's flat, she found more items including the family tree of the Flieg family, which Professor Berkowitz realised included the famous Jewish writer, Stefan Heym. And the family bookshelves showed

a connection of Brigitte's Hanf family with the writer Helene Hanff, author of *84 Charing Cross Road*.

Finally in April 2021, long tables were erected in the Kiddush Room and the contents of the archive were taken out of their boxes and spread out for inspection



Sergeant Arthur Flynn speaking at the inauguration of the Schleswig-Holstein State Parliament in February 1946

by Toby Simpson and Professor Berkowitz. Dr Simpson expressed to me that this was a very rare and beautifully preserved collection and Prof Berkowitz joyously exclaimed that the materials could inspire 30 doctoral dissertations! There was a vibrant life to the papers and family photographs that was yet to be told; even family holiday photo albums provided a glimpse of a culture that existed over the course of the entire 20th century.

The Flynn Family archive is just one example of what may be many similar collections in the families of Belsize Square members. We can all contribute to the preservation of our heritage if we start to organise what we have now - when we may still have some reference points and knowledge about items or their origins. But even if we no longer have relatives who we can ask, it is important to appreciate that there are experts that we can access to help ensure that links and cultural and family history will not be lost for future generations.

We shall publish some more insights into this important archive in a future issue of *Our Congregation*.

A vaccine pioneer

At Jewish Book Week in February, **Simon Schama** introduced the subject of this forthcoming book – a 19th-century Jewish scientist from Odessa. **Alex Antscherl** discovers more about Waldemar Haffkine

Jewish Book Week celebrated its 70th anniversary this year and was back with dozens of live events, after an online-only year in 2021. In a sell-out event, Julia Neuberger introduced renowned historian Sir Simon Schama to talk about the topic of his current work in progress: Waldemar Haffkine. This bacteriologist invented vaccines against cholera and bubonic plague and in 1897 was the first person to conduct a controlled blind trial on the delivery of vaccines. Haffkine's pioneering work was responsible for saving the lives of millions, but a false accusation against him almost ended his career.



Protective inoculation against cholera by W.M. Haffkine 1894
© Wellcome Collection



Waldemar Haffkine was a university science student in Odessa and a member of a Jewish self-defence brigade, formed in response to the pogroms of the early 1880s. After being extricated from prison three times by one of his university teachers, he was persuaded to move to Paris and focus on microbiology, not politics.

Haffkine conducted revolutionary research, using himself as the first human test subject, to develop an anti-cholera vaccine. In 1894 he moved to India where the disease was rampant and launched a successful vaccination programme, despite the scepticism of the Indian medical establishment under the British Raj.

Following an outbreak of bubonic plague in Bombay in 1896, Haffkine speedily developed a vaccine that reduced the risk of contracting bubonic plague by 50%. Within a few short years over 4 million people had been inoculated.

Schama explained to a fascinated audience how he came across this innovative scientist in an 1899 *Jewish Chronicle* report of a dinner hosted by the Maccabeans philanthropic society in London. It was held to honour Haffkine, with an address given by special

guest Joseph Lister, the prestigious 'father of modern surgery'.

But just three years later, Haffkine was dismissed from his position as Director of the Vaccine Institute of Bombay in disgrace, after he was wrongly blamed for the deaths of 19 people from tetanus poisoning following inoculations. Schama drew a parallel with the simultaneous and notoriously anti-semitic Dreyfus Affair. Like Alfred Dreyfus, Waldemar Haffkine was eventually acquitted thanks to a supportive letter by a prominent Gentile published in a newspaper. In Haffkine's case it was English physician Sir Ronald Ross, a Nobel Laureate, who wrote to *The Times* to defend him.

The Haffkine Institute in Mumbai, now making Covid vaccine, is one of the few reminders left in the world of this pioneering Jewish scientist whose work so resonates in our own times.

PURIM LUNCH

To celebrate Purim, a lunch for some of our senior members was organised by Eve Hersov, community care co-ordinator. The group of 26 guests was small to try to keep the Covid risk low. The Rabbi and Cantor attended too and there was plenty of good food and conversation. Charly Fraylich was the most senior guest and was pleased to tell everyone that the secrets to her longevity and great appearance are never wearing make-up and having her son Paul do all her cooking!

Eve asked guests to bring something personal and of significance to them to show to the other guests. Some of the fascinating mementoes and beautiful photographs shared are shown here. They were not only a marvellous talking point but a reminder about the importance of our own historical family objects or images. Eve spoke to the guests about the Flynn archive (see page 3) and how best to preserve historical family material.



Above: Marianne Summerfield with her great-grandmother's Shabbat serving dish

Below: Vera Kovacs as a child, in a photo taken by her father, the photographer at the Budapest Opera House



Above: Marian Goldberg – in Italy age 20

Below: Judy Field with book about her husband

ACTION FOR UKRAINE AND FOR REFUGEES

Deborah Cohen



to assist the humanitarian relief efforts on the ground in Ukraine, in neighbouring countries and right here at home. You can find out more at bod.org.uk/ukraine.

The Board of Deputies' bi-monthly meeting on 20 March was addressed by Melinda Simmons, the UK Ambassador to Ukraine, who is a member of Finchley Reform Synagogue, and Maurice Helfgott, Chair of World Jewish Relief. This was one of the most moving Board

meetings in which I've participated. You can hear and see the speakers on youtube.com/watch?v=JlGL6fxo-wl – they start at 19 minutes into the recording.

The Board of Deputies has also been tracking the progress of the Nationality and Borders Bill through Parliament. The Board has expressed its concerns about a number of elements of this legislation, which puts the UK outside the standards of international law, including the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The Board has been working with the René Cassin charity, the Jewish voice for human rights (renecassin.org). The Board urges synagogue members to write to their MPs to show the extent of feeling in the Jewish community about the situation in Ukraine and about the threats to the rights of refugees. A template letter to MPs by the Board and René Cassin that you can use or adapt is available on the Board of Deputies page of the Synagogue's website: synagogue.org.uk/about-us/board-of-deputies/.

As members of a Synagogue founded by refugees, I am sure that you will appreciate the need for us to speak out.

Belsize Square Synagogue is represented on the Board of Deputies of British Jews by Deborah Cohen together with Peter Strauss and Dilys Tausz.

NEWS FROM ABERNEIN MANSIONS NW.3.

Dear Fellow Members

I am pleased to report that Pesach here in the Mansions went off without an itch. Of course there are still matzo crumbs in every corner and cranny of the place. Our house cleaners, who are off Remainsch extinction, have a very big job in their hands, but I am sure they will overcome it.

We are very fortunate to have newly amidst our inmates an eminent retired Canter, Rev Egon Bummelschwitz. He not only leads our Seder, but has also been re-educating me on many aspects of Jewish knowledge. He told me, what I had long forgotten, that during Shavuot we should eat only dairy foods, also it is known as the Holiday of Wheats. A sort of breakfast serial festival. But the main purpose is to celebrate Moses bringing down from the Mount Sinai the ten commandments. I was proud to show Rev. Bummelschwitz my button collection. He must have been so over-impressed and taken aback, as he was completely dumb-struck throughout my demonstration and did not say a word afterwards.

You might be surprised to learn that my wife Mrs Klopstick is a very private person. She is almost very shy. For much of the time she likes to keep herself in the background. In this way she can remain entirely enormous. For this reason, and partly to expand my profile as an investigating journalist, I have decided to join her in her new role. And so together we founded the Klopstick und Klopstick defective agency. KUK DA for short. I will be as the frontage, while she is observing in the bag. We have already concluded our first case. For obvious reasons, due to confidentiality, I can't be too specific, but I can say that the gardeners' missing leave blower was found in a Mrs B's flat. It was something to do with a spilled vase and drying up a damp mattress.

May is my favourite month of the year. "The Darling Butts of May" when everything is beginning to be blooming. I am very much looking forward to attending the Israel Dinner and No Dance at Belsize Square on Israeli Memorial Day the fourth of May. For me it is a relief not to have to be dancing, especially as Mrs Klopstick can't attend. She is on a draining course with the SAS on the Breaking Beacons in South Wales. The Duchess from Cornwall is paying a visit, and my wife is hoping to have a word with her to recommend she takes up weight lifting.

With the best of intentions
Fritz Klopstick

OUR CENTENARIANS



Mery Suchy celebrated her 100th birthday on 20 March with a tea party at her home

ASK FRITZ

I am indebted to a number of members who asked my advice on how to avoid becoming wrinkled, or how to get rid of them. I am completely against buttocks and auntie ring creamers. The wrinkles change people's faces into a deathly mask and the other is worse than youthfulness. Mrs Klopstick claims that I am without wrinkles because I am obese. She says that my skin is so full there is no room for wrinkles to develop. My wife has managed to keep her body as smooth as a baby's bottom by going to the gym. Through weight lifting she has built muscle tone which keeps her free from wrinkles and greases. So, my advice to get rid of wrinkles is either to put on weight, or to lift it.

HOLOCAUST EDUCATION PROGRAMME FOR SCHOOLS

Peter Bohm

After a year's break due to Covid, we have welcomed back pupils from four schools to our annual Holocaust education programme. Two more schools are scheduled to visit in the summer term and the programme has also been presented online. Many thanks to the large number of Synagogue volunteers who make these visits possible, and who were honoured at the Shabbat service on 2 April.



Hilary Solomon showing her late father Herbert Levy's 1939 German passport – stamped with a large red J

Notice is hereby given that the

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE BELSIZE SQUARE SYNAGOGUE

will be held in the Synagogue Hall,
51 Belsize Square, London NW3 on

THURSDAY 23 JUNE 2020 at 8.00pm
(to be followed by refreshments)

AGENDA

1. Introduction and Report by the Chairman
2. Financial Report
3. Appointment of Auditors
4. The election of Jackie Alexander as Chairman for a period of three years
5. Election of members to the Board
6. Discussion on Annual Reports
7. Presentation of the Cheder Review
8. Any Other Business

Candidates for Election to the Board

John Abramson*; John Alexander*; Carol Cohen;
Deborah Cohen; Keith Conway*; Suzanne
Goldstein*; Joe Hacker*; Richard Pollins*; Jimmy
Strauss*; Dilys Tausz*; Justyn Trenner*

*members of the present Board

Under clause 17(c) of the Constitution, every member of the Synagogue not being in arrears with more than one year's subscription shall be entitled to attend and vote at the Annual General Meeting. Voting is by secret ballot of those present at the AGM and entitled to vote.

Awareness and Middot

The seven weeks between Pesach and Shavuot, called the *Omer*, gives us the opportunity to learn.

Together, let's explore the *Middot* (traits) associated with how divinity manifests itself in the world, the *Sefirot*. Understanding each *middah*, we will learn how to apply them in our daily lives.

Three zoom sessions on Tuesdays, 26 April & 17 May with Cantor Heller and on 31 May with Rabbi Botnick who will round it all up and teach us how to put it into practice.

To register email:
cantor@synagogue.org.uk

Belsize Square Synagogue London

SYNAGOGUE SNAPSHOT

Benji Nathan
Sous chef



Benji plating the trio of desserts at the Synagogue's Night to Remember in 2019

What's your favourite thing about your work?

From a young age I always knew I wanted to be a chef. My parents tell the story of waking up in the morning to the smell of fresh cooked pancakes and omelettes when I had friends staying round. I now specialise in catering, where there's a lot more variety than in the restaurant field, where you often have to cook the same dishes over and over again. The event, food

and style change every time, which constantly keeps me challenged and excited. The part of being a chef that I have always loved is seeing people's reaction to the food. Food is such a big thing in people's lives especially in Judaism. As they say, 'they tried to kill us and now we eat'.

What is the hardest part of your job?

As I work many weekends it can be hard when my mates are out having fun and I need to work. It sorts itself out though. I have friends in the industry working double shifts four or five times a week and I appreciate that I do not have this schedule. Catering is very rewarding. You get a lot of client interaction and customer satisfaction, and you always feel part of an event. Sometimes we are even offered to join the party!

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

I have always been interested in theatre lighting and set design. I love musical theatre and often when I go to the theatre I pay more attention to the set and lighting than the actual performance.

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

Being a Nathan / Alexander I was born into two families where many generations have been Belsize members. I am proud to be a member and active in the community.

What's your favourite festival?

My favourite festival has to be Passover. Spending time with family at the Seder, singing, laughing and telling the story of our ancestors is brilliant. Especially the family tradition of usually spilling wine all over the table cloth and singing "Hey frogs!" to the tune of Hey Jude! You have to get over eating matzah though.

Where do you like to sit in shul?

A few rows from the front in the middle left side. It is the same row that my grandparents used to sit in.

SERVICES

Friday evenings at 6.45pm
Saturday mornings at 10.00am

Kikar Kids – Junior Service

Saturday 7 May, 4 June, 2 July
Under-5s Service in the Crèche
Junior Service for 5–9-year-olds in the Library
Kids Kiddush at 11.30
Often followed by a potluck lunch
Contact Richard Pollins on rgpollins@gmail.com

SHAVUOT SERVICES & STUDY

1st Eve: Saturday 4 June at 6.45pm, followed at 7.30pm by study session, Tikkun Leyl Shavuot
1st Day: Sunday 5 June at 10.00am
2nd Eve: Sunday 5 June at 6.45pm
2nd Day: Monday 6 June at 10.00am including Yizkor

CHEDER AND BEIT MITZVAH

Sunday mornings 9.30am–12.30pm
Enquiries to Head: Caroline Loison
Term Commences – Sunday 1 May
Half Term – Sunday 29 May & 5 June

ADULT DISCUSSION GROUP

Please note change of times for some of the sessions.

Sunday 1 May
10.00am–12.00pm Zoom session: Student Rabbi
Dr Annette Boeckler – Pirkei Avot Selected Texts

Sunday 8 May
10.00am–12.00pm Zoom session: Student Rabbi
Dr Annette Boeckler – Pirkei Avot Selected Texts

Sunday 15 May
10.00–11.15am Zoom session: Student Rabbi
Dr Annette Boeckler – Pirkei Avot Selected Texts

11.30am–12.45pm Hybrid session: Rabbi Stuart
Altshuler – topic TBC

Sunday 22 May
10.00–11.15am Zoom session: Student Rabbi
Dr Annette Boeckler – Pirkei Avot Selected Texts

11.30am–12.45pm Zoom session: Professor Rosa
Freedman, Reading University – UN Human Rights
systems and how to engage with them

Sunday 29 May
10.00–11.15am Zoom session: Student Rabbi
Dr Annette Boeckler – Pirkei Avot Selected Texts

11.30am–12.45pm Guest speaker TBC – please check
News From the Square

Sunday 5 and 12 June
No Adult Discussion Group

SHAVUOT OFFICE HOURS

The office will close at 5.00pm on Wednesday 1 June
and will re-open at 9.00am on Tuesday 7 June

SYNAGOGUE HELP LINES

BELSIZE SQUARE SYNAGOGUE

51 Belsize Square,
London NW3 4HX

020 7794 3949
office@synagogue.org.uk
www.synagogue.org.uk

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Friday: 9.00am–2.00pm

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Evenings/weekends phone
Calo's (Undertakers)
020 8958 2112

OUR CONGREGATION

Editor: Alex Antscherl
Associate Editor:
David Horwell

Copy date for the
July/August issue is
25 May 2022
Contributions to
alexantscherl@me.com or
the Synagogue office

