



A QUESTION ANSWERED

Rabbi Gabriel Botnick introduces a new format for his regular column

Mixed-faith marriages

Dear Rabbi,

I recently attended an interfaith wedding which was officiated by a rabbi. I know some rabbis and synagogues will do this, while others won't (including Belsize). I'm hoping you can help me understand why this is and what goes into deciding whether or not such ceremonies would be permitted.

Sincerely,
Altarly Confused

Dear AC,

I completely understand why you might be confused about this inconsistency across synagogues and ministers. On the surface, there doesn't really appear to be any difference between marriage ceremonies where both partners are Jewish and where only one is. But what's really going on is the understanding of and approach to Jewish laws and customs – a tension which resides in both the philosophical and theological realms.

In Jewish law (Halakhah), a person can only fulfil the performance of Mitzvot (commandments) if they are obligated to perform them in the first place. For instance, as Jews, we are obligated to hear the Shofar blown on Rosh Hashanah. Therefore, only someone who is Jewish can blow Shofar for the community, as that person would be equally obligated to hear the blasts as those in attendance at services. While someone who isn't Jewish is more than welcome to attend services (and even blow Shofar for themselves at home), we would never expect or invite them to blow Shofar for us at the synagogue.

The same idea applies to a Jewish wedding, which includes a number of blessings that are applicable only to those who are Jewish. So if someone who isn't Jewish were to recite any of these blessings, it would be no different than them blowing the Shofar at synagogue. Another way to think of this is in the inverse: a Jewish person can go to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve to enjoy a beautiful, spiritual experience, but they would never attempt to participate in Communion, as that is a rite reserved solely for those who are baptised Christians. Of course, every faith tradition has its own nuances, but the principle of reserved rituals is widely shared.

Where things get a bit more confusing is that there's only one way to get married in Judaism: through the ceremony with which we're familiar. But in Christianity, there are actually a variety of marriage rituals depending on the identities of the couple. For instance, in Catholicism, there are three types of weddings: between two baptised Catholics (which includes mass); between a Catholic and another Christian (which can take place in the church, but doesn't include mass); and between a Catholic and a non-Christian (which can take place in a church or elsewhere and doesn't include mass). So while Catholicism (and other faiths) offer ways to marry members of their faith to others, Judaism simply doesn't have a formal religious framework for interfaith marriage.

And now things get really confusing: if Judaism doesn't offer a way to marry someone Jewish to someone who isn't, how is it that we all know of Jews who've had interfaith weddings officiated by a rabbi?

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This all boils down to how that rabbi views Halakhah and whether or not they consider it to be binding. In Orthodox and Masorti Judaism, rabbis understand Halakhah to be binding and therefore will only act in accordance with the law. Of course, there's a wide spectrum of how rabbis might understand and interpret the law, but they all adhere to the basic legal principles of our tradition. In Reform and Liberal Judaism however, rabbis do not necessarily consider Halakhah to be binding. This is why such synagogues and rabbis might be okay with offering interfaith weddings – because they don't feel bound to the letter of the law and might instead prioritise their own personal conscience or communal needs over Halakhah.

Of course, everyone is free to do as they wish – and I understand the desire to include Jewish elements in interfaith ceremonies – but I worry

that doing so could unintentionally treat our tradition as a cultural accessory, rather than as a lived faith.

Although I don't perform intermarriages – and it's Belsize policy not to do so as well – there are still a number of ways that we ensure that couples of mixed faiths can feel welcomed by, and included within, our community. For instance, I still meet with couples to help them talk through what it means to get married and build a family together. I might recommend having a private, civil wedding at a registry office and then having someone who is important to them both conduct an emotionally meaningful and personal ceremony at a later point, (even if just a few hours later. Then, after they're married, we often call the Jewish partner to the Torah for an *Aliyah*, after which I offer them and their non-Jewish spouse a blessing as they set out on this exciting new stage of their life's journey. At Belsize, we recognise and celebrate the diversity of our

community and strive to make everyone feel valued and included. While I realise our approach might not be a perfect solution for everyone, I believe that it allows us to honour both our traditions as well as couples' wishes.

I should add that many of my colleagues and I have been having conversations for a while now, trying to determine whether or not there are other ways to approach this question. So far, no consensus has been reached, but I believe what we're currently doing is already a huge improvement on the past. Most importantly, I want non-Jewish partners to know that even if I can't perform their wedding, I can still be their rabbi and Belsize can still be their community. I'll tell you, we have a number of students in our Cheder where one of the parents isn't Jewish and yet that parent is still an integral part of our community.

Best wishes,
Rabbi Botnick

SYNAGOGUE SNAPSHOT

Adam Davis

Barrister, Synagogue Honorary Assistant Secretary and golfer



What's your favourite thing about your work?

Every day is different. This April I will have been a barrister for forty years and things happen at court that still surprise me. I love the fact that I am not office-bound. Up until recently I was travelling around

the country, working in, and also exploring, many different cities.

As a result of my career at the Bar and my legal training, I have been able to be involved in various different activities. I am a trustee of a sports organisation and a non-executive director on the board of a property fund.

What is the hardest part of your job?

Two things come to mind: First, the aftermath of a conviction by the jury. Often, I am dealing with young defendants charged with murder and receiving life sentences, with minimum terms to serve before parole. The consequences of a conviction

are the same for any defendant charged with murder, but sometimes it is hard to accept, especially when you believe a defendant should not have been convicted.

Secondly, we often have to wait for custody defendants to be transported to court. There are delays on a daily basis, requiring everybody present to have infinite patience.

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

I would choose to be a professional golfer, although I am not sure I would earn very much as my current handicap is 8.2!

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

We were recommended to the Cheder for our eldest daughter, some 35 years ago, and we joined the synagogue not long after. We love the fact that the services are musical, in Hebrew, and that my wife Cheryl and I can sit together.

I am now the Honorary Assistant Secretary and I have been on the Board and Executive for many years.

What's your favourite festival?

Yom Kippur, especially the Neilah Service which is so special.

Where do you like to sit in shul?

I am a confirmed right winger - for seating, that is!

EVENTS

THE CHANUKAH MARKET

The Chanukah Market on 7 December was a great success as always – a happy social occasion raising £13,000. Great thanks to all who organised, worked at or attended the event.



The Belsize Market Klezmer Blast

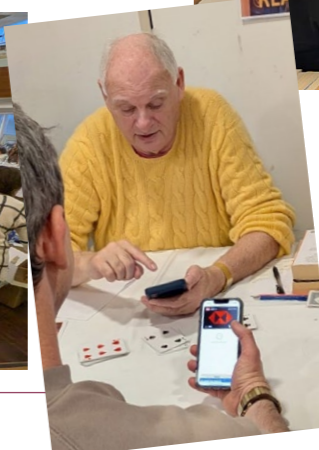


Did I hear you say 'more cheese?'

Brilliant baristas



Groceries galore



Josephs and the Amazing Technicolor Bookstall

Mentalist Jeff Salmon sells the whole of HSBC to an unsuspecting victim



Another successful sale



Defenders of the falafel



SENIORS' CHANUKAH LUNCH

The annual pre-Chanukah event for members over the age of 80 was attended by a record-breaking number of newcomers and old hands. Marion Nathan's skilled team of volunteers served excellent food prepared by Marion's nephew Adam Nathan, and every table buzzed with conversation. Rabbi Botnick and Cantor Heller led everyone in singing, with Rabbi Botnick playing his guitar.



Rabbi Botnick and Cantor Heller entertained the guests

Service! The luncheon volunteers

Choosing life



Elaine Bernstein describes the background to her recent Bat Mitzvah, and the joy of the event itself

My Bat Mitzvah on 20 September last was a fantastic experience. My parents had been members of another synagogue, but I stopped going to cheder at the age of 12 and I didn't have a Bat Mitzvah or Bat Chayil. After my mother died in 2016, old school friends of mine suggested I join Belsize, and I never looked back! After 7 October 2023, I found myself coming to shul more often, I started learning Hebrew and I went to Israel a few times. I happened to be in Tel Aviv when Rachel Lasserson had her adult Bat Mitzvah, so I watched it on Belsize Live and on my return I told her how emotional and moving I had found it. Rachel said 'The Rabbi hopes that it will inspire others!' and it felt like a natural step for me – and a new challenge. 'I've been learning Hebrew for a year, I've been in Israel, it'll be easy,' I thought. But it was not easy. I had no idea about tropes (the melodies used for chanting the Torah) and when I sing, people have been known to put their hands to their ears or to mention windows breaking!



Elaine's trope study centre

Cantor Heller introduced me to two online resources, TropeTrainer.com and Sefaria. I learnt the first two aliyot in Israel on a kibbutz, learning as if they were a pop song, singing along with the automated TropeTrainer voice in the lazy afternoons that kibbutz life affords. Returning to the UK, I got into the third aliyah: 13 long verses, which at times felt never-ending. The more I read the words, translated them and studied the translations, the more each sentence was, as they say, gold. Seeing the connections between 2,000-year-

old Hebrew and modern-day Hebrew was such a thrill. But the tropes were still bugging me, so I borrowed a keyboard from my neighbours. I used to play the piano when I was young and I had always wanted to play again. This gave me a reason to play with purpose once more. Playing the tropes helped me learn them, and while in the beginning they appeared to be an unnecessary nuisance, over time I began to appreciate their function.

When it came to the D'var Torah, Rabbi Botnick asked me to choose one verse that really resonated. I chose what seemed the obvious one –

החיים והמוות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה
ובחרת בחיים למען תחיה אתה וזרעך.

*I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse.
Choose life so that you and your descendants shall live.
Deut. 30:19*

Choosing life is choosing the covenant that God made with us and choosing to live life according to the Ten Commandments. It is everything that is good about life. Rashi said that choosing life is choosing the good bit. And over time 'choose life' occurred as an invitation rather than an instruction. 'Choose life' became my summer motto and it made life easy and wonderful.

The day of the Bat Mitzvah was a complete joy. Having all my family, life-long friends and my congregation all in shul was incredible. Taking the Torah round, twice, was the best. Everyone was beaming at me and wishing me mazal tov or telling me I'd 'nailed it' and I just felt the joy of all the wonderful Belsize people I've come to know.

What has resulted from the Bat Mitzvah is permission to totally embrace my Judaism. I now go to shul every Shabbat. The Rabbi always talks about the beauty of Shabbat. I missed the first Shabbat after my Bat Mitzvah, thinking I'd give myself a break, but I felt completely discombobulated, and the break is actually coming to shul. I'm also really proud of myself, which is a delicious feeling! I recommend going ahead and becoming Bat Mitzvah to any woman who is wondering about doing so.

What's in a name?

Tor Marie reflects on how converts choose their Hebrew name and what it means to them

Many of us move through life without giving our names a second thought: we use them every day from birth, but might not know their meaning or the intentions behind them. For Jews by choice, however, choosing a Hebrew name is a rite of passage. Towards the end of the conversion journey, as appearance before the Beth Din approaches, we begin to think about the name we wish to carry

now. In some ways due to conversion I am completely different, but in others I am the same.'

Omar Fesh also began his search by looking for a Hebrew equivalent of his given name. 'The most obvious one was Omer. While it resonated with my soul, deep in myself I knew it was one, but likely not *the* one.' He spoke with Rabbi Botnick, and after much reflection and deep thought, landed on Amir

The symbolism behind a name, perhaps choosing one that resonates because it represents a valued quality

into our Jewish life.

I believe that the names we choose for ourselves are an expression of what matters to us: they represent what we find beautiful, meaningful or the person we would like to be. With this in mind, I asked several members of our congregation to share the names they chose and how those choices came to be.

One of the most popular approaches was to choose the Jewish version of your given name – a way to hold continuity through your life and different versions of yourself.

'Mary is my given middle name, and Miriam is the Jewish version of that name,' shared Pamela Duncan. 'I chose the name Miriam to symbolise that I am, in many ways, still the same person that I was before conversion, but now am the Jewish version of that person.'

Eva Robledo-Sierra echoed this sentiment: 'The name I chose was Chava – which is the equivalent of Eva in Hebrew. I loved the fact that I could choose the same name as I have

Oz: Amir as a phonetic nod to his given name, and Oz drawn from an existing nickname.

For some, the decision is already made. Sarah Heywood explained, 'I almost think it was significant that my parents chose that name for me – like it was preordained. Obviously her significance as the key matriarch and wife of Abraham was a huge factor as well, and makes the name very special to me.'

Others look instead to the symbolism behind a name, perhaps choosing one that resonates because it represents a valued quality. Biblical and modern Hebrew, Yiddish and Ladino offer a wealth of names representing Torah figures, positive qualities, animals, nature, music and more – the Jewish parenting website Kveller has over a thousand examples.

'My English name Eileen comes from the Gaelic name Eibhlín or Aibhlín, meaning 'little bird'; said Eileen Cheung. 'I came across Zipporah, also meaning "little bird", and as I looked more into the

name the more the story behind her seemed to resonate with my own life. As a foreigner and the wife of Moses, Zipporah symbolises the positive potential of cross-cultural relationships and the blending of different traditions in God's plan.'

'My choice of Hebrew name is Shalom,' said Abi Welsh. 'It's a name that I have always loved, and my mind instinctively turned to it. When I looked into the meaning of it (beyond the obvious), and discovered that it means 'completeness' or 'wholeness' too, I connected with it spiritually. I am a devoted mum and consulted my two sons about my choice of Hebrew name. I liked the circularity of them helping to choose my name when I chose theirs.'

Honouring family or friends is another approach: a way to carry a loved one with you and continue their legacy. Sue Arnold chose to do this when she converted 25 years ago; her cousin, born to her paternal aunt and a Jewish father, sadly died with her husband and newborn baby in a tragic home accident. She was only 22. 'Her name was Tamara and I chose to honour her memory with my Hebrew name.'

As for me? I decided on Esther Ora: Esther for the brave and resourceful queen, and Ora, meaning 'light', a gift from a dear friend. Together they reflect the values and relationships I hope to carry into this next chapter of my Jewish life.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this article: Pamela Duncan, Eva Robledo-Sierra, Omar Fesh, Sarah Heywood, Eileen Cheung, Abigail Welsh and Sue Arnold.

NEWS FROM ABERNEIN MANSIONS NW.3.

Dear Fellow Members

We are now arising into the debts of winter und it is whitel that all those who are of an elderly perception should rap up wormly. I have personally given my wive, Mrs Klopstick, a fleas jacket. I hope she wares it out.

As all inmates hear in Abernein Mansions are of the Jewish face, we have bean adviced to become a lurt at all times. In truce, we have never felt unter thread here, but we have bean told that we must make our front door more security conscience. So, the Mansions has now a knew logging dewise. To open the door we have to tip out a secrete nummer coat. Sum of the reticents hear have hat difficulteas remembering this coat. It was Mrs K who salavated the situation. She has put bye the front door a box of stones that she collected from the beech on her resent cycle rite to Brighten. So, any won who forgets the nummer ken schuck one of them at Mr Blinkin's window, our knew caretaker, und he ken then let them in. Sofa only once has the window bean broken when Professor Lochenkopf shose to youth a catapolt for this perpose.

The dead line for this publication is very clothe to the Chanukah Market. So, I am going to admit my article befourhendt. Mrs K has said that I must be first in the kew for the grosseries. She has provided me with a large back und a long list for the chopping. It looks like we will be still consumating my percheses well into two southend und twentysix.

I hope that this new year will be won of piece. We have enough to do combetting climax change. Hear in Abernein Mansions we take this tusk very serious. We have decided to go utterly green und a part from recircling, we have band the youth of any plastic unlest it is composable.

With the best of intentions
Fritz Klopstick

ASK FRITZ

This month my male back has bean over-flowering with requests on how to cope with the raising cost off living. The wurst is the entless rice of foot chopping. If you can't stretch youre pounds, schillings und pants, then there is only won solution. You must cut down on foot intake. If you eat halve your usual preportions, this will also be a benefactor to your all over hellth.



Deborah Cohen reports on the Board's latest meeting

The last meeting of the Board of Deputies was held on 30 November, the day that since 2014 has been Israel's national day of commemoration of the expulsion of Jews from Arab lands.

With this in mind, the theme of the meeting was Mizrahi Jews, with an address by Rabbi Joseph Dweck, the Senior Rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese Community, who is about to make Aliyah after 11 years in that role.

His address was preceded by a presentation by Lyn Julius, the Deputy representing Harif, a UK charity dedicated to promoting the history, culture and heritage of Jews from North Africa and the Middle East. Ancient Jewish communities there produced the Babylonian Talmud, great rabbis, doctors, thinkers and poets, followed by major economic and cultural contributions in modern times. Jews were an integral part of the Middle East and North Africa before they were driven from their homes in the second half of the 20th century. The Board recognises that the history of this significant section of the Jewish world does not get the attention paid to that of Jews of Western or Ashkenazi heritage.

In April 2021 the Board published a report on Racial Inclusivity in the Jewish Community. It highlighted the assumption that all Jews are white and European and it stressed the importance of adopting programmes that recognise and explore the experiences of Black Jews, Jews of Colour, and Sephardi, Mizrahi and Yemenite Jews within the UK Jewish community.

Pikuach is the Jewish schools' religious education inspectorate, accredited by the Department for Education. The meeting was reminded of the importance of including the history of Jews from Arab lands and Iran in their curriculum. As a member of the Board's Communities and Education Division, I will now ask about materials that can be used in Cheders where most pupils do not attend Jewish schools, as is the case at Belsize Square.

Please read the latest report from the President of the Board that gives the up-to-date position on current issues and challenges being dealt with. It's on Belsize's website, synagogue.org.uk – see Latest News section.

As always you can contact any of the three Belsize Square Deputies (Dilys Tausz, Peter Strauss and me) if you want more information or have comments you want fed back to the Board.

EXPLORING

Another Etz Hayyim Synagogue

Alex Antscherl visits a tiny treasure that shares its Hebrew name with ours

On a narrow street in the delightful harbour town of Chania in Crete stands a historic synagogue. It is a small, charming building with an interior in the ancient 'Romaniote' style, which originated from the Greek-speaking Jews of the Eastern Mediterranean over two millennia ago. Unusually, the bimah is at the western end of the room. The Etz Hayyim community has occupied this building almost continuously since the mid-17th-century. However, there were Jews in Crete for hundreds of years before that, dating back to the 3rd century BCE, when Jews from Palestine and Egypt first settled on the island following its conquest by Alexander the Great.

who were expelled from Spain and Portugal. In the rural areas, Jewish families produced kosher cheese, wine, grain and *etrogim* for local use and export, but prohibition on further Jewish purchase of land forced some to work in moneylending or as traders of silk, metal or leather, while others with less capital were artisans, grocers, tanners or butchers. Despite local restrictions, connections with Jewish centres of learning were retained, with Cretan Jews travelling to places such as Padua for training as doctors, lawyers or rabbis.

Eventually, in 1669 the Ottomans came to rule Crete, bringing increasing tension between Christians and Muslims. Although the island's Jewish population diminished in numbers in this period, Jews were permitted to buy and legally inherit property for the first time. The Etz Hayyim Synagogue, once a Venetian Catholic church, was acquired by Chania's Jews after the Ottoman conquest. In the 19th century the Jewish community suffered mixed fortunes, from blood libel accusations to the inclusion of a Jewish representative in the new ruling assembly in 1875.

By the time of the German occupation in June 1941, there were fewer than 350 Jews left in Crete, most of them in Chania. They were rounded up and deported in June 1944, but the ship on which they were imprisoned was torpedoed by the Royal Navy taking with it the last vestiges of the 2,500-year-old community.

That might well have been the end of this long and rich history had it not been for the extraordinary dedication of one man. Nikos Stavroulakis was born in the USA in 1932 to a Jewish



The entrance to Etz Hayyim synagogue

mother originally from Istanbul and a Greek Orthodox father from Crete. This artist, historian and founding director of the Jewish Museum in Athens, described by some as a 'Renaissance man', viewed the remains of the Etz Hayyim synagogue that had been desecrated by the Nazis, abandoned for 50 years and then hit by an earthquake in 1995, and decided to rebuild it. Incredibly, within four years, he had raised the funds and supervised the work, with the synagogue being rededicated in 1999. Not only has the delightful interior been restored but also the mikveh and the graves of former rabbis in the courtyard. Now Etz Hayyim is an active non-denominational synagogue where shabbat, *chagim* and lifestyle events are celebrated, as well as history preserved, and 25,000 tourists a year are welcomed. I was one of them recently and it was fascinating.



The restored aron hakodesh

Crete was greatly prized by competing empires for its access to trade routes and as a naval base. Jewish numbers there grew in the 14th and 15th centuries as Crete was a common destination for the Jews

SERVICES

Friday evenings at 6.45pm

Saturday mornings at 10.00am

Shabbat Shira – Choir Shabbat

Friday evening and Saturday morning services, 30 and 31 January, to honour the synagogue's choirs

Kikar Kids – Junior Shabbat Service

Saturday 3 January, 7 February, 7 March
11.00am in the crèche for under 5s Service
11.00am in the library for 5-9-year-olds
11.30am Kids Kiddush
Contact Richard on rgpollins@gmail.com
for more information

PURIM

Monday 2 March

Purim Party at 5.00pm

Service and Megillah reading at 6.45pm

CHEDER AND BEIT MITZVAH

Sunday mornings 9.30am–12.30pm

Enquiries to Head: Caroline Loison
caroline@synagogue.org.uk

Start Of Term Sunday 11 January
Half Term Sunday 15 & 22 February
End of Term Sunday 22 March

ADULT DISCUSSION GROUP

Meetings take place on Sunday mornings in term-time.

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

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

COMMUNITY NEWS

NEW MEMBERS

We extend a cordial welcome to:
Simiso Velepini | Denis Raingold | Ian Morley
Matt Polden | Alex Percival | Michael Tessler & Sophie
Bridgers with son Isaac | Neil Hyman & Karen Hall
Andrew Levy | Bradley Papier & Danni Foreman
Alex Mass & Lucinda Palmer

BNEI MITZVAH

Mazal Tov to Galia & Assaf Weiler Ofek on the Bar Mitzvah of their son Ethan on Saturday 10 January

Mazal Tov to Yuri Koorland on the Bat Mitzvah of his daughter Sasha on Saturday 24 January

Mazal Tov to Sarah Douglas & Sam Waller on the Bar Mitzvah of their son James on Saturday 7 February

DEATHS

We regret to announce the passing of Jackie Lesser on 1 November

SYNAGOGUE HELP LINES

BELSIZE SQUARE SYNAGOGUE

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www.synagogue.org.uk

SYNAGOGUE OFFICE HOURS

Mon–Thu: 9.00am–5.30pm
Friday: 9.00am–2.00pm

SYNAGOGUE LIBRARY

Open to members during office hours

RABBI

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FUNERALS

During Synagogue office hours phone Synagogue

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

OUR CONGREGATION

Editor: Alex Antscherl
Associate Editor: David Horwell

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CHOIR Shabbat

FRIDAY 30 JANUARY 6.45PM

SATURDAY 31 JANUARY 10.00AM

Join us on Shabbat Shira to thank and honour our Professional, Community & Youth choirs who help make our liturgy so special and unique.

In memory of Henry Kuttner z"l