



A QUESTION ANSWERED

Rabbi Gabriel Botnick explains Shavuot traditions

Why do we eat dairy on Shavuot?

Dear Rabbi,

We've recently celebrated Pesach, which has matzah and the Seder plate as its main symbols. And on Sukkot, we have the sukkah and the lulav and etrog as symbols. But what about Shavuot? I know there's a custom to eat dairy foods, but I don't really know why or how that's a symbol for the holiday.

Sincerely,
Udderly Confused

Dear UC,

You're right that Shavuot tends to get short shrift compared to the other major festivals. For instance, Passover and Sukkot are both a week long, whereas Shavuot is only two days, and just one day in Israel. That being said, there are some wonderful traditions associated with this often-overlooked holiday.

Shavuot celebrates the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. It also marks the early summer harvest, particularly that of wheat. And these two aspects play central roles in the various customs of the *chag*. But instead of expressing itself through one symbolic object, Shavuot offers a connection to the holiday through a cluster of practices.

In the Torah, just before we read about God giving the Ten Commandments at Sinai, we're told that Moses had to lead the people from their encampment towards the Mount. The rabbis are surprised by this: how were the people not already gathered and waiting at the mountain? This was a major event and they had been advised to prepare themselves for it, so it's odd that Moses had to get them moving.

The rabbis thought it would be best not to repeat the ill-preparedness of our ancestors, and so they decided we should stay up all night, readying ourselves to 'receive the Torah' at Shavuot morning services. This tradition came about in the 1600s, around the same time that coffee houses started appearing in the Ottoman Empire, and eventually England. These days, the study at night is known as a Tikkun Leil Shavuot. While there are plenty of communities that do indeed engage in learning throughout the night before holding services at dawn, at Belsize we simply go on until 10pm or so and then reconvene for services at our usual 10am start time.

Another custom that used to be more popular is decorating the synagogue, as well as our homes and businesses, with greenery in honour of the holiday. There are two primary ideas behind this practice. The first is that Shavuot is a harvest festival, and so we bring the flowers and trimmings of late Spring to the synagogue as a reminder of our ancestors bringing their first fruits to the Temple. The second reason behind this custom is likely found in the historical context of when it took root: also around 16th and 17th centuries. At that time, it was a common practice to spread fresh rushes on the floor, as when they were stepped upon, they gave off a pleasing fragrance. Not only did this act harken to the threshing of wheat, but it made the synagogue a more pleasant place to celebrate the festival. Sadly, the practice of decorating spaces with greenery largely fell out of practice in the 1800s, but at Belsize we still have a beautiful arrangement of flowers on the Bimah.

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Finally, dairy on Shavuot. In my opinion, this is the most delicious and enjoyable holiday tradition. From cheesecake to blintzes, bourekas to bimuelos, Jewish communities around the world have a wide variety of dairy foods they enjoy on this festival. Some rabbis believe the origin for this practice is in the giving of the Torah: that the people had slaughtered animals in preparation for this monumental event, but once they received the Torah and the laws of Kashrut, they realised they hadn't properly slaughtered the animals, so they simply ate what other foods they had on hand. This is a nice idea, but it struggles to be harmonised with the fact that Moses told the people to remain in a state of ritual purity for three days before receiving the Torah, and coming in contact with the blood and body of a dead animal would make people ritually impure.

There is another – more obscure – reason provided by our sages

for the practice of eating dairy on Shavuot: it's a pun. You see, rabbis love puns almost as much as they love food. And when they can't come up with a good pun, they rely on the foods simply being symbolic. This is why we eat fried foods on Chanukah (to remind us of the miracle of the oil), bitter or salty foods on Pesach (to remind us of the bitterness of slavery), and apples with honey on Rosh Hashanah (for a sweet new year). In the case of Shavuot, we turn our attention to the place where we received the Torah: Mount Sinai.

This holy mountain actually goes by a number of different names in the Bible: *Har HaElohim* (the Mountain of God), *Horev* (desert), and *Har Gavnunim* (Mountain of Many Peaks). It's this last name, *Har Gavnunim*, that provides the basis for the custom of eating dairy on Shavuot because *Gavnunim* (many peaks) sounds a lot like *gavina* (cheese). And so the rabbis decided it would make sense to eat dairy as a way of bringing to mind

the place where we received the Torah.

And so, UC, we have three beautifully symbolic acts associated with Shavuot: learning Torah at night; decorating the synagogue with greenery; and eating dairy foods – all of which help us better connect to the main aspects of the holiday. So I invite you to join us at Belsize for Shavuot this year. Do come to our Tikkun Leil Shavuot on Thursday, 21 May, which will also include our annual 'Great Belsize Bake-Off', where you can bring in your own home-made cheesecake and see if it is deemed to be the community's best!

Sincerely,
Rabbi Botnick

If you have a question you'd like Rabbi Botnick to address in a future issue of *Our Congregation*, please send an email to rabbi@synagogue.org.uk with the subject 'Ask the Rabbi.'

SECURITY

KEEPING OUR SYNAGOGUE SAFE

An update from **Carol Cohen**, Belsize Square's Head of Security

With the ongoing situation in Israel and its neighbours, we in the Diaspora must be more vigilant than ever. The deadly attack in Manchester on Yom Kippur was a dark day for the British Jewish Community. I am pleased to say that our Security Team managed well on the day and understood the reality of the situation. We worked closely with the local police and were able to give reassurance to our community, ensuring that a peaceful day continued. But since then the Jewish community has sadly had to cope with the arson attacks in Golders Green, Finchley and Kenton.

In collaboration with our professional guarding company we have successfully maintained full security coverage for all services and events at Belsize. We also work closely with the Police and the CST. Additionally, we are in the process of implementing physical security enhancements at the synagogue, with completion expected by the end of this year.

We are fortunate to have an exceptionally dedicated group of volunteers who generously give their time to help safeguard our services. We encourage all members to consider how they can contribute – if you can volunteer, please do so. Over the past year, we have also significantly expanded our trained Supervisor team and if you are willing to take on additional responsibilities, we invite you to consider this role, which offers the opportunity to be part of a committed and supportive group. The contributions of all our volunteers are greatly valued and appreciated.

Ensuring the safety and security of our community is a top priority for our synagogue. We encourage all members to remain informed, engaged, vigilant and proactive. The Security Team sincerely appreciates your cooperation and support.



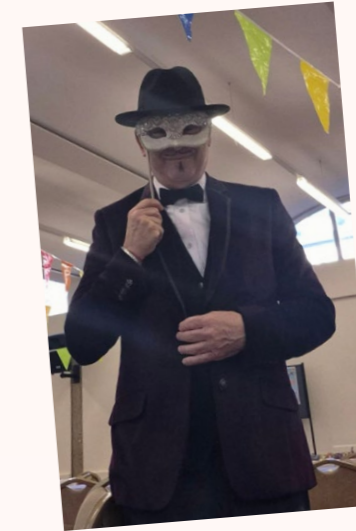
EVENTS

PURIM

The Purim community tea and megillah reading were very popular events, with plenty of participants (including our Ministers) entering into the festival spirit by wearing fancy dress.



Queens, kings – and who's that hippy?



The Cantor of Mystery

One of our brilliant team of megillah readers – was anybody fooled by Emily Marbach's disguise?



The tea crowd, intently listening to the Youth Choir



The Youth Choir in action, conducted by Sofia Swenson-Wright

FUNDRAISING FUN

This year's BSS Supper Quiz was held on Sunday 22 March and yet again it was a very entertaining evening. Fun but challenging questions had more than 100 guests puzzling over a 'connections' picture round, facts about Japan and trying to recognise the national anthems of countries from Ukraine to Canada. The brilliant organising committee was led by Adam Hurst, with questions also set by Julia Soule, Karen Sanders and Simon Cutner, with delicious catering from Falafel Feast organised by Sam Sanders.

The Cordwainers team was delighted to win, although if there had been a prize for best team-name, it seems likely that Heated Rabbiry would have carried that off! The evening raised over £1,000 for the synagogue.



The winning Cordwainers team

SYNAGOGUE SNAPSHOT

Nick Viner

Co-founder and director of Circle Square;
Synagogue Assistant Honorary Treasurer



What's your favourite thing about your work?

It's the satisfaction of feeling that we managed to help someone in a small way, or sometimes in a quite meaningful way. Along with a partner, I run Circle Square, a network for people over the age of 50. We share ideas and

life experience, and aim to use our combined energy, expertise, curiosity and wisdom to help each other and society more broadly.

We put on a range of events and offer carefully curated services for our members; we also offer coaching and mentoring to people approaching retirement, helping them plan and prepare for the future. We work with some outstanding coaches and make unexpected connections between people in our 450-strong network.

What is the hardest part of your job?

I'm involved in a number of charities, including the Jewish

Museum London, which I chair. In these very difficult times, charities, especially those involved in the arts and culture, are deeply stretched financially; with so many worthwhile and needy causes, raising money is the hardest thing. The second hardest thing is biting my tongue in meetings, particularly if they go on too long!

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

An architect. I'm lucky to have been the client in several very special building projects, including JW3 on Finchley Road. It would be great to be on the other side.

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

We were married by the wonderful Albert Friedlander of Westminster Synagogue, but when he retired as Rabbi and our eldest child started Cheder, we became members of Belsize. Very handy as we live within five minutes' walk of the shul – but I'm always late for Board meetings as I set off from home at the time I'm meant to arrive...

What's your favourite festival?

Yom Kippur, starting with Kol Nidrei: I love the solemnity, the anticipation, and the generosity of hours of uninterrupted contemplation and beautiful music ahead.

Where do you like to sit in shul?

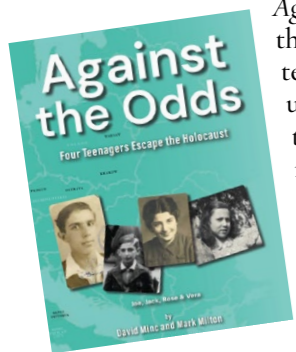
Always on the right-hand side, never the left. Ideally at the aisle end of the second row, though it can sometimes be the front row.

BOOK PREVIEW

Against the Odds

FOUR TEENAGERS ESCAPE THE HOLOCAUST

Carole Joseph and her brother Mark Milton introduce this new book, co-authored by Mark and his cousin David Minc, relating the true story of their parents' daring escapes from the Holocaust



Against the Odds tells the stories of four teenagers who faced unique challenges to escape from imprisonment and family separation during World War II, hiding their identities to make their daring ways

across Europe. It brings to life their resilience and courage in the face of unimaginable adversity.

The first part of the book is Jack Minc's first-hand memoir, detailing his miraculous escape, during which he developed skills as a serial

escape artist, resistance fighter – and black-market entrepreneur. The stories of the other three escapees, Rose, Jack's future wife, Joe, Jack's elder brother and Vera, Joe's future wife, have been compiled from family memories and add to Jack's to interweave the four personal histories of survival into that of one family. Rose slipped through the Nazi net in Belgium, aided by three heroic local families. Joe evaded the clutches of the Gestapo, only to be arrested in England and interned halfway round the world. But he ultimately participated in the Normandy landings and was then instrumental in tracking down Nazi war criminals. Vera fled

Czechoslovakia at the last possible moment and, thanks to the bravery of a family in Italy, hid there in plain sight. The binding together of Jack's first-hand story with the other three creates an impressive history of escape and redemption.

Two of those stories have deep Belsize connections. Joe and Vera Milton joined the Belsize Square community in the 1950s and remained members for the rest of their lives. Their daughter Carole, her husband Jonathan and their children Adam, Paul and Gabs followed, with Carole, Jonathan and Gabs still active members today. Mark was Bar Mitzvah at Belsize and is now a member of Westminster Synagogue.

Belsize members are cordially invited to the book launch at Westminster Synagogue on Tuesday 12 May. Please email Carole Joseph at carole@josephpartners.co.uk if you wish to attend or to pre-order a copy of *Against the Odds*.

THEATRE

How to Make a Mess

How to Make a Mess is a new musical that will run from 4–28 June at Upstairs at the Gatehouse Theatre in Highgate. It is subtitled *A Totally Unauthorised Love Letter to Nigella Lawson* and explores how a woman navigates grief, memory, loving, living, cooking and eating when she inherits a Nigella cookbook from her estranged mother who recently has passed away. Belsize member Rachel Borchard Lewis is the associate producer and tells us more about it here.

HOW DID YOU BECOME INVOLVED IN THIS PRODUCTION?

I met the producer, Tanya Truman, after finishing another theatre project and was asked to come on board. The show has been in development for four years, and it has been a real privilege to work on it over the past year, in the lead-up to its first staging.

When I attended a read-through before getting involved, I found myself alternating between laughing and crying during the songs. I remember thinking that my mum, Miriam Borchard (a Belsize member until she passed away), would have absolutely loved it. I also felt strongly that it would have wide appeal, and that I wanted to help it reach a broad audience.

WHAT INSPIRED ITS CREATOR, EMILY ROSE SIMONS?

Nigella Lawson is, of course, a major inspiration for this musical. Emily spent a long time getting to know her through her books, interviews and TV shows, particularly her first series, *Nigella Bites*. She came to feel that Nigella was encouraging us to embrace far more than simply yummy food.

Emily sensed that Nigella recognised how women can feel trapped, or even trap themselves, in difficult relationships with food. Whether it's the dinner party host having a breakdown in the kitchen, or those

who haven't felt able to explore their own culinary instincts suddenly finding themselves responsible for feeding a family, often without a modern, forgiving guide to cooking – one that allows for laziness, fun and experimentation.

WHY WAS A MUSICAL, RATHER THAN A STRAIGHT PLAY, THE RIGHT WAY TO TELL THIS STORY?

Emily has said simply, 'Because cooking is magical, and magic must be musicalised!' The magic of this story lies in someone making tiny but world-changing steps in her life, and song is the best way to hold a microscope to these otherwise almost imperceptible changes.

WHAT DO YOU THINK NIGELLA WOULD THINK OF THE SHOW? WILL YOU INVITE HER TO SEE IT?

We think Nigella would really enjoy it. We have been in touch with her team and, while they have chosen not to endorse the show at this stage, the invitation remains open for them to come and see it!

DO YOU THINK THERE'S A PARTICULAR CONNECTION BETWEEN NIGELLA'S LOVE OF FOOD AND HER JEWISH INHERITANCE?

Yes. Nigella has spoken about not growing up kosher or particularly



Natasha Karp as Anna and Tanya Truman as Nigella in the new production

observant, but that her family was, as she put it, 'in every way, essentially about the food. They were totally, culturally Jewish – from cooking too much, to feeding anyone the moment they walked through the door, and always sending them home with more.'

Emily has also commented on how Nigella's Jewish recipes carry a kind of humble freedom, which she takes as an invitation to make them her own and more personal.

Tickets are available now www.upstairsatthegatehouse.com

NEWS FROM ABERNEIN MANSIONS NW.3.

Dear Fellow Members

I can't not admit that Mai is my favourite time from the year. It is the best part from spring with the prospectus of summer stretching in the four front. On top of this comes Shavuot, one of the more cheerful festivals where we celebrate Moses clambering his way down Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments in his hands. Here in Abernein Mansions we always have a cheese cake tea in the communion launch to mark up this occasion.

It will have been brought to regular readers' attention that the kitchen is not Mrs Klopstick's most professional arena. Nevertheless, she is determined to induce yet another of her unusual cheese cakes. I have to say that I found last year's effort using Camembert not a great success. I think I have persuaded her to use a milder variety and I think she has chosen to make it

with the more traditional Matzorella cheese as she has some left over from Pesach.

Mrs K and I have recently put our hats together. We would like to do something very close to our hearts and this is to induce a fitness regime in which we could engage the entire community here and in Belsize Square. Of course, my wife wanted it to be biased on a sporting endurance advent. As this is not exclusive to every one I suggested it should be less taxing. So to start this off we have finally plucked for a gentle march from Swiss Cottage to Regents Park, round the outward circuit and backwards again.

Of course, amidst the inmates here are some who are not immobilised enough to injure such a long work. For them and any one else in such a posture we will be organising a coach to drive a long sight the march. There is no charge for entry, but a donation will not be unexpected and will go to a very fine charity.

With the best of intentions
Fritz Klopstick

ASK FRITZ

Many from you have asked me how to deal with scammers on the telephone. First from all, if they start with 'How are you today' say good buy straight away. If the call is more personalised and for a sample they say hullo Manfred oder hullo Gretl, what even your name is, just say 'Please ride to me as I have bad herring at the moment.' Then down put the phone. If it is a scam they properly won't have your address.



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

The Board of Deputies has recently published its review of the past year. The Board now represents some 200 British Jewish constituent organisations, principally synagogues, but also various communal organisations such as charities, welfare agencies, educational bodies, regional Jewish councils and youth movements.

During 2025, the Board focused on working with government, other faith

groups and civil society to advance the interests of our diverse community. The results of these efforts are impressive. The Board has achieved a high profile in Parliament – its work has been cited in Parliamentary exchanges no fewer than 15 times. This has been bolstered by the publication of the report of the Commission on Antisemitism, authored by Lord John Mann and Dame Penny Mordaunt, to which members of the Board contributed and which has been welcomed by the government. In March this year, immediately following the abhorrent arson attack on the four Hatzola ambulances in Golders Green, the Board's President, Phil Rosenberg, was telephoned by the Prime Minister, illustrating the important role of the Board in British life.

The Board is always looking for ways to help the Jewish community. With the increase in antisemitism being a major concern, it organised the first ever BoD At Work conference to address the challenges of being Jewish in the workplace. Fifty leaders of Jewish workplace networks came together to share best practice and experience in setting up Jewish staff networks in organisations, for mutual support and to combat prejudice.

It should be of key interest to Belsize members to know what happens to the very small monthly subscriptions we pay to support the Board of Deputies. Its full Impact Report for 2025 is available at www.bod.org.uk/our-impact-2025/

ALIYAH

Diary of an Olah Chadasha

Belsize member **Elaine Bernstein** had been thinking about migrating to Israel for some time and recently she took her decision. Once her visa came through she acted very speedily, despite the current extremely stressful situation, and she was able to make Aliyah on 19 March. She has promised your editors that she will send us regular reports. Later she'll write about the background to her Aliyah decision, but here is her first article on her life as an *Olah Chadasha* – a new immigrant to Israel. As she said in her message to us on Erev Pesach, 'It's so funny being here and every single person is wishing every single person they encounter chag sameach!'



Eggs, avocados, honey – and happiness

30 MARCH 2026

Today I spent the day with a friend. Her daughter is in the army and is being allowed to come home for the Seder. Her daughter is mainly vegan (tricky for Seder night!) and will only eat eggs that are produced at a particular moshav in Ge'alya, 30 kilometres south of Tel Aviv, probably because they are 100% organic and free range. So off we drove to Ge'alya. We stopped at the moshav's egg shack, which also sells freshly picked avocados, home-made orange blossom honey and, when in season, olive oil. Israel's equivalent of a farm shop, I guess. Of course as soon as I open my mouth and say 'boker tov' people know I'm not sabra-born. The man asked me where I was from and my friend very proudly told him that I'd made Aliyah only 10 days ago. He couldn't believe it. He was so happy, shocked and excited that he pushed a bag of avocados towards me followed by a jar of orange blossom honey. I have experienced many Israelis being happy when they're told I've made Aliyah. They wish me welcome and are shocked that I've returned during a war! But this man, my friend told me, said he was so moved it made him cry. That's Israel!

JEWISH CULTURE MONTH

'LESS OY AND MORE JOY' – INCLUDING AT BELSIZE!

The first ever Jewish Culture Month will take place from Saturday 16 May to Tuesday 16 June, celebrating 'the joy, laughter and light of Jewish life in the UK'. More than 100 individual events will focus on a range of themes including British Jewish contributions to music, literature, food, history, fashion, architecture and comedy.

The month will include a host of talks, tours, live events, screenings and workshops, in venues ranging from galleries and theatres to restaurants, public spaces, Friday night home suppers and community hubs. Events will take place in centres such as the Tate, the V&A, the Southbank Centre and JW3 in London as well as at many Jewish and non-Jewish venues both in London and around the country, even extending internationally – to Dublin.

And at Belsize? Our own exciting contribution will be a concert of Ladino music on Sunday 17 May. Ladino is the language preserved to this day by many Sephardi Jews, descendants of the population expelled from Spain in 1492. Cantor Heller is an enthusiast for both the Ladino language and its musical tradition and the concert will feature him, his son Cantor Yohel Heller, soprano Julieta Kunik and the Boybershop Quartet. This promises to be a very special event. Booking details are in the advertisement on page 8.

Jewish Culture Month is a project of the Board of Deputies. You can find out more by visiting the Jewish Culture Month website, jewishculturemonth.org.uk, where you can also subscribe for updates.

YOM HASHOAH CEREMONY

David Rothenberg

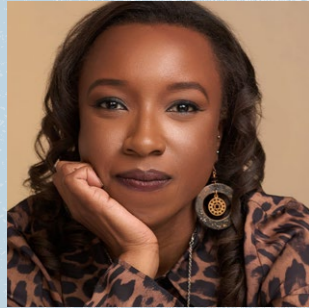
Yom Hashoah – Holocaust Remembrance Day – was marked with a ceremony on Sunday 12 April at the Pound Lane Liberal Jewish Cemetery. This was a new date for our synagogue's Holocaust commemoration, rather than its traditional Tisha b'Av timing. It now fits in with the Israeli and international Yom Hashoah on 27 Nisan. The stone Holocaust memorial has been cleaned in the last couple of years and is shining once again. The service was conducted by Rabbi Botnick and Cantor Heller and a Kaddish for the six million who had perished was then recited at the memorial.

There is an unexpected connection with the Knesset in Jerusalem, through which the Yom Hashoah date was established in 1951. The artist who created the plaque on our memorial, Benno Elkan, himself a refugee from Germany, was the sculptor of the magnificent bronze Menorah opposite the Knesset.

SYNAGOGUE SNAPSHOT

Monefa Walker

Translator, pianist and synagogue community security supervisor



What's your favourite thing about your work?

There are several aspects to my work. When I'm doing translation, my favourite thing is to help bridge the gap of misunderstandings, which often happen because things do get 'lost in translation'.

When doing security at Belsize or with the CST, my favourite thing about it is simply the mitzvah in itself, and making new friends in the community.

What is the hardest part of your job?

The hardest part about working in translation is ensuring that AI doesn't steal my job in the future! With security, the hardest part is the unfortunate but occasional incident of unkindness from people while helping. I don't ruminate on it too long, as the bigger picture of keeping myself and the community safe is paramount, and I receive love in abundance.

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

I'd be a concert pianist! I've been a classical pianist for 20 years and a composer, but after Covid, like many other artists I rerouted my career path – which is why I went to university and got a degree in French and Spanish.

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

'Happenstance', albeit a spiritual one. I come from a Sephardic patrilineal background, but I had a secular upbringing. I went to local primary and secondary schools in Hampstead. I frequented my Granddad's house for many Friday night dinners in my childhood. When he died I was 16 and I felt very disconnected and bereft of all aspects of Jewish life. In my late twenties, serendipity and an accumulation of choices eventually led to my arriving at Belsize Square with friends during Simchat Torah – and the rest is history.

What's your favourite festival?

Chanukah. I get to light candles regularly and cook Caribbean dishes without restriction. It's great!

Where do you like to sit in shul?

Left hand side, near the back. But during the High Holydays, I'm on the opposite side in the middle.

Monefa will be compering our exciting concert of Ladino Music on Sunday 17 May. Please see advertisement on this page for details.

BELSIZE SQUARE SYNAGOGUE PROUDLY PRESENTS:

LADINO MUSIC

CANTORS PAUL & YOHEL HELLER
SOPRANO JULIETA KUNIK

ACCOMPANIED BY BENJAMIN WOLF AND
CÉSAR RODRÍGUEZ DURÁN

FEATURING THE BOYBERSHOP
QUARTET

PLEASE EMAIL:
ADAM@SYNAGOGUE.ORG.UK
TO ATTEND

SUNDAY 17 MAY, 2026, 5.00PM

BELSIZE SQUARE SYNAGOGUE
51 BELSIZE SQUARE, NW3 4HX

£10 PER TICKET WWW.SYNAGOGUE.ORG.UK

Belsize Square Synagogue's
Annual Tikkun Leil Shavuot

Eilu ve'Eilu: One Torah. Many Voices

Learning to Honour Difference in a Fractured World

Thursday 21 May 2026

6:45 Shavuot Services
7:30 Light Supper and Cheesecake Contest*
8:30 Learning Sessions, Snacks, and More
10:00 End

*bring a homemade, nut-free cheesecake and
the winner will take home the prize!

BELSIZE SQUARE
SYNAGOGUE

Looking to the future



Joe Hacker reports on the progress of this forward-looking exercise

Our most recent *Belsize of the Future* session took place on Sunday 15 March. It represented a pivot point in this process; a move from reflecting on the past and present to imagining the future. Faced with the first attempt at the Belsize Essence (core values) that had emerged from six community sessions during November and December, attendees were asked to deconstruct, rearrange, enhance or reaffirm the statements as they saw fit.

BELSIZE ESSENCE 1ST DRAFT:

- Progressive and adaptive
- Traditional services and music
- Welcome individual differences

BELSIZE ESSENCE 2.0:

- Independent and Open-minded
- Inclusive and Welcoming
- Traditional yet Egalitarian

I think that what has emerged is both more nuanced and more powerful. It reflects the careful thought that attendees gave to each word and its associations. It also recognises that there are natural tensions between some values. *Traditional yet Egalitarian* is perhaps the most visible tension (especially during services); however, we can also find subtler ones such as between *Independent* and *Inclusive*, which can imply separateness and togetherness respectively. The way in which we find the balance between these potentially contradictory notions is part of what makes Belsize unique.

The role of this *Belsize Essence* is to capture as succinctly as possible **how** we do things at Belsize. **What** we do as a synagogue has changed since our founding and will continue to do so. By identifying our core values, our essence, we will have a reference point that allows us to build for the future while retaining our soul. *Traditional* will ensure we value our heritage and halacha while *Open-minded* nudges us to keep adapting and trying new things. *Welcoming* encourages us to consider how things appear to newcomers and non-members while *Independent* reminds us to chart our own path and be resilient despite the fickleness of public sentiment. *Inclusive* serves as a constant reminder to ask

'Who does this exclude, even if unintentionally, and how do we ensure they have a genuine opportunity to engage should they want to?'

IMAGINE YOURSELF IN 2040

We might often think of a synagogue as primarily a place of worship or prayer (Beit Tefilah). However, the word synagogue itself has its roots in the Ancient Greek words 'syn' (together) and 'agein' (to lead, bring, or drive) so literally a place of assembly (Beit Knesset). What's more, the Yiddish word 'shul', that Ashkenazim often use, derives from the Greek or German word 'schola' which means school (Beit Sefer). So, remember that we are envisaging a community that facilitates the sharing and enriching of whole lives, not just religious rites and milestones.

With the above in mind, attendees were led through a guided visualisation. They imagined themselves in the year 2040 hearing and reading about a thriving Belsize Square Synagogue, and then visiting it themselves to discover that all the reports were true. They then captured what they had seen, heard and experienced while in this imagined future that told them Belsize was indeed thriving. I am not going to identify any particular themes at this point as we are still in the more expansive thinking part of this stage.

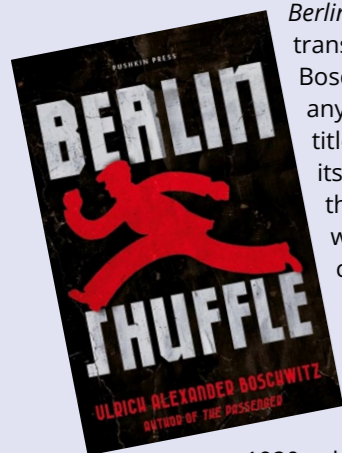
Instead, the ideas produced on 15 March will feed into the thinking of a Core Strategy Team. This team is comprised of our two Chairs, the Rabbi, our CEO Lee Taylor and eight members who were specifically selected to give as broad a representation of our membership as possible. I will be guiding them through a rigorous series of three workshops, the first of which will involve imagining different concrete elements of a vision for 2040 and then synthesising them to identify the key themes. I will be giving a progress update at our AGM on Monday 1 June followed by a Q & A. You will then have the chance to discuss the process directly with members of the Core Strategy Team should you choose.

If you have any questions or comments, or would like to find out more about the Belsize of the Future initiative, please send an email to BotF@synagogue.org.uk

Our Hidden Treasure

Minyanman is stunned by a remarkable novel in our Synagogue's library – and is moved to explore further

'He had already been jailed several times for vagrancy and other transgressions of the law. But Fundholz was a man who, despite everything, preferred his freedom to being detained.'



Berlin Shuffle – the pace of this translation of Ulrich Alexander Boschwitz's modernist masterpiece is anything but a shuffle. The arresting title will lure any Belsize member into its dark addictive squalor, especially those with a connection to what, within a year of its writing, would be called the Vaterland. But instead of a kindly 'father' we feel Germany, just before it grows into the Reich, so viscerally through each character's story that it resembles an abusive parent. We are in Berlin in the late 1920s, driven into the sewers after the Great Crash and the collapse of the Weimar Republic.

This is probably the most cinematic of novels to be found in our library. Its style draws on the greatest experimenters and character-builders of the 18th and 19th centuries and looks forward to the late-20th-century post-modernist Brett Easton-Ellis's debut *Less than Zero*. Think *Woyzeck* (a concentrated Act IV of *King Lear*) meets Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, with Flaubert's conciseness. Inner turmoil and *Dreck* – the German word has a sense of moral grime and filth – has never been given a more sympathetic read. The novel sits in the fiction section of our library but would almost as happily sit in the documentary history section. It is published by Pushkin Press, whose managing director is Belsize member Adam Freudenheim.

From the first page the reader is propelled downwards into a tragedy peopled by 'sub-heroes' (or perhaps *Untermenschen*) who randomly intersect on one day, at one tavern. Their collective murderous interiority is finally uncorked and bleeds into the jolly Huntsman pub. The stories that lead to a climax there are all told in a cinematic-style single-shot take, which would be used 30 years later in Agnes Varda's films, but which in this writing captures a rich chromatic span in varying shades of grey: pain, squalor, envy and brooding foreboding. It is modern in its timelessness.

Today's reader will sense the despair on which the Third Reich will be built, as the author forges relationships based on co-dependent abuse to bind the characters. Perhaps it's a modernist lesson for us as we move from Pesach to Shavuot, wondering if there is something more to give us hope and help mould a supportive *kehilla*.

One of the most pitiful characters in the book survives a trauma that pre-dates the contemporary low point to which everyone has stumbled. *'Frau Fliebusch no longer understood the times, and that was her misfortune. Her mind was still stuck in the years before the Great War. Everything that came later, everything she found inimical – the war and the inflation and all the consequences of the war, the entire wickedness of recent times – had rushed past her like some horrible dream.'* The horrible dreams are the lived reality of millions of unemployed people, embodied by the handful of homeless characters of the *Berlin Shuffle*. Overnight in November 1938 the horror extends precisely to the privileged Berliners the 'Shufflers' beg from – without having to identify them as Jewish.

In Boschwitz's better known second and last-surviving novel, *The Passenger*, we are plunged into the vertiginous fall of being a non-citizen and a hunted one at that. One bourgeois Berliner's overnight change after Kristallnacht from 'someone' to simply 'Jew', becomes a frenzied sleepless criss-cross of Germany. Those of us who feel we have a home and a community in Belsize may only want to read this book when we are sure we have a safe interior Jewishness to anchor us. This is a simply terrifying read that grips the soul.

In his short life of just 27 years, Boschwitz experienced global upheaval, skirmishes with destitution, arbitrary arrest and brushes with death. He was thrust into alien-hood, first in his country of birth and then across continents as he fled for his liberty. The Jewish origin of his father who had converted to Protestantism before he was born was sufficient to push the young Boschwitz into the stateless frenzy that engulfed so many after the 1935 Nuremberg laws came into effect. His mother's Christian origins now counted for nothing. After making it to England he was interned as an enemy alien and sent to Australia, capturing him where the Germans had failed. But in October 1942, Germany finally prevailed. The ship returning him to England and freedom was torpedoed and Boschwitz drowned. His two novels survive him. It is known that he was working on a third, provisionally entitled *Traumtage* (Dream Days). We are left to dream what may have been. It is unlikely to have been a magical tale of unblemished reveries.

The Passenger was not in our library. I was compelled to buy it after reading *Berlin Shuffle* and I am donating the copy to the library. Thank you, Ulrich Alexander. You have come home.

As told to James Rossiter



MUSIC AT BELSIZE

Michael Cayton

We have been fortunate to benefit from the wonderful organ-playing of Michael Cayton at our services for over 20 years. At the end of June, Mike will be retiring from this role. This follows his decision to obtain a PGCE and to work as a teacher of music in schools. We will celebrate Mike's contribution with a kiddush after the service on Saturday 11 July.

Mike might just have the broadest experience of liturgical music of anyone in London today. Since 2003 he has simultaneously held the posts of Director of Music at St John's Wood Church and organist at Belsize Square Synagogue. He is also the conductor of the Chiltern Choir.

Born in Lancashire and educated in Blackpool, he served with the Grenadier Guards as a trumpeter, pianist and organist. He went on to study piano at the Royal College of Music, where he gained his BMus and ARCM and won the Hilda Anderson Deane prize for conducting and improvisation. Since his debut as an organist at the Royal Festival Hall in 1988, Michael has been in demand as a recitalist and accompanist and has appeared all over the country and in Europe, with notable London appearances at St Martin-in-the-Fields, Westminster Abbey, Blackheath Concert Halls and the Wigmore Hall. He has been broadcast on Radio 2, Radio 3, Radio 5 Live, the World Service and on BBC's *Songs of Praise*. He has broad musical tastes, a hunger to learn new styles and a particular talent for improvisation, and he enjoys performing jazz, German cabaret and Judeo-Spanish Ladino music as well as fusion and funk.

Belsize Square's Director of Music, Ben Wolf, comments, 'We are immensely sad to be losing Michael. He is a world-class organist who has mastered the liturgical music of Belsize Square Synagogue and the *liberale* tradition, while also bringing his own musical personality and gift for improvisation to our services. He has also helped the synagogue and me personally by playing for concerts and tours. I particularly remember his magnificent organ-playing for Belsize trips to Berlin, a wonderful improvisation battle with our own David Lawrence for 'Belsize Has Talent' back in 2011, and his participation as pianist, organist or conductor in numerous Music at Belsize concerts. Nonetheless we appreciate that he now wishes to pursue other avenues in his career and we wish him the best of luck for the future.'



Invitation to nominate Candidates for Membership of the Board of The Belsize Square Synagogue (The Synagogue)

The tenth Annual General Meeting of The Synagogue (the AGM) will be held on **Monday 1 June, 8pm**. The Board hereby invites the members of The Synagogue to nominate candidates for election to the Board for a period of three years commencing from the AGM. There are 19 vacancies.

Nominations must be in writing, addressed to the Hon. Secretary and submitted to the Synagogue Office by twelve noon on **Friday 15 May 2026**. Each Nomination must be signed by at least five members of The Synagogue who are themselves entitled to vote at the AGM. Only valid nominations that are received by that date can be considered. No member may sign more nominations for the Board than the number of vacancies (namely 19).

In accordance with the Articles of Association of The Synagogue, the following eleven members will be retiring from the Board by rotation but are eligible for re-election if duly nominated:

Adam Buchler; Simon Cohen; Adam Davis; Pat Hirschovits; Oliver Jerome; Freddy Lehmann; Adam Nathan; Sarah Percival; Rob Nothman; David Pollins; Claire Walford

From **18 May**, a list of the candidates duly nominated will be available for inspection at the Synagogue Office and the formal notice of the AGM will also include a list of those candidates.

SERVICES

Friday evenings at 6.45pm

Saturday mornings at 10.00am

Kikar Kids – Junior Shabbat Service

Saturday 2 May, 6 June, 4 July

11.00am in the crèche for under 5s Service

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

11.30am Kids Kiddush

Contact Caroline at caroline@synagogue.org.uk for more information

SHAVUOT SERVICES

1st Night: Thursday 21 May at 6.45pm followed by our Tikkun Leil Shavuot

1st Day: Friday 22 May at 10.00am

2nd Night: Friday 22 May at 6.45pm

2nd Day: Saturday 23 May at 10.00am including Yizkor

CHEDER AND BEIT MITZVAH

Sunday mornings 9.30am–12.30pm

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

Half Term Sunday 24 & 31 May

End of Term Sunday 5 July

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:

Caspar Finch | Oliver Michaelson | Sherrill Maisel
Amir & Cilla Shnitzer with children Mielle, Noa & Thierry
Aleksiina Kallunki

BIRTH

Mazal tov to Maya & Kevin Meyer on the birth of their son Zachary Joseph

BNEI MITZVAH

Mazal Tov to Fabrizio Nascè on his Adult Bar Mitzvah on Saturday 9 May

Mazal Tov to Daniella Ashton & Phillip Glyn on the Bat Mitzvah of their daughter Isabella on Saturday 30 May

Mazal Tov to Caroline & Mickael Loison on the Bnei Mitzvah of their children Zoe and Ben on Saturday 13 June

Mazal Tov to Sandra & Andy Burke on the Bat Mitzvah of their daughter Sophie on Saturday 27 June

Mazal Tov to Kate Weinberg & James Harding on the Bat Mitzvah of their daughter Elsie on Saturday 4 July

DEATHS

We regret to announce the passing of:

Cilly Haar on 11 March

Geoffrey Levene on 15 March

SYNAGOGUE HELP LINES

BELSIZE SQUARE SYNAGOGUE

51 Belsize Square,
London NW3 4HX

020 7794 3949

office@synagogue.org.uk

www.synagogue.org.uk

SYNAGOGUE OFFICE HOURS

Mon–Thu: 9.00am–5.30pm

Friday: 9.00am–2.00pm

SHAVUOT OFFICE HOURS

The Office will close at midday on Thursday 21 May and will reopen at 9.00am on Tuesday 26 May

SYNAGOGUE LIBRARY

Open to members during office hours

RABBI

Rabbi Gabriel Botnick
rabbi@synagogue.org.uk

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

CANTOR

Dr Paul Heller
cantor@synagogue.org.uk
07949 078366

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Lee Taylor
lee@synagogue.org.uk



CHAIRS

Annette Nathan and Jimmy Strauss
chairman@
synagogue.org.uk

CHEDER AND YOUTH

Caroline Loison
caroline@synagogue.org.uk
020 7794 3949

COMMUNITY CARE CO-ORDINATOR & BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT SERVICE

Eve Hersov
eve@synagogue.org.uk
07944 574676

FUNERALS

During Synagogue office hours phone Synagogue

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

OUR CONGREGATION

Editor: Alex Antscherl
Associate Editor:
David Horwell

Copy date for the July/August issue is 10 June. Contributions to alexantscherl@me.com or the Synagogue office



ISRAEL CHARITY DINNER

Comedian Philip Simon interviewed by Rob Nothman at our Israel Charity Dinner on 21 April