

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Sunday 21st February 2021

Reports to the AGM

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Co chairs' Report

Normally, the biggest problem in writing this report is to find something new to say. Not so this year! 2020 brought a surfeit of changes for our community: a mixture of the disastrous with—for us—the unexpectedly beneficial. In the big picture, of course, the pandemic is a disaster for humanity on a scale that we can hardly grasp, but our individual and communal challenge has been to adapt and flourish in conditions that we were totally unprepared for. People are struggling, and the community too has struggled, but we hope and believe that we are proving ourselves equal to the challenge.

The most obvious difference in this year has been the transfer of all our activity online. Rabbi Mark rose brilliantly to the challenge from the very start of the pandemic, bringing to remote services both the gravitas and the warmth that characterise his services in person. Although nothing can replace the sense of collective purpose and support that comes from meeting together, online services have turned out to be a surprisingly good substitute. Also surprising has been the increased reach of our activity: many people who've been unable to attend services in person, through remoteness or ill health, have become regular attenders to remote services and have come to feel at home in a community that would otherwise have been difficult or impossible to reach. And, perhaps as a result of this accessibility combined with the increased time for reflection that everyone has had in lockdown, we've seen a big increase in enquiries about conversion and in general interest in Liberal Judaism.

A similar benefit has been our new closeness to Rabbi Mark's other communities, in Leicester and Manchester. Other positive changes have been more frequent adult education classes—Rabbi Mark increasing his workload on these fourfold!—and other online activities, so many

that we have to choose between them for the now-weekly e-mail reminders. During this period, there has also been a rise in the numbers of people explicitly interested in conversion, in finding out more about Judaism and our community, and/or wanting to investigate their own heritage. Along with 2020's new members, these "Jewish-curious" people have brought new energy and fresh thinking with them. It has been very interesting to see the difference it makes to our services and discussions to release them from the constraints of geography.

As, hopefully, we begin to return towards normal life at "some time in 2021", we'll need to reflect on how to preserve the gains that we have discovered in this unexpected way. This will be one of the biggest challenges facing us this year.

The cheder too has adapted extremely well to the problems of the pandemic, continuing to engage and educate the children, for whom online education is no longer a novelty! Adam Budd stepped down recently as head of the cheder after many years of service, first as a teacher and latterly as head. The community owes him many thanks: the cheder has flourished under his leadership, with numbers as high as they have ever been. Gila Holliman and Mor Kandlik have succeeded him as co-heads, and we have every confidence that they will ensure the continued success of the online cheder classes until they can meet again in person.

One unforeseen benefit of the pandemic has been an improvement in the community's finances. You can read our treasurer's report for the details: it's enough here to say that years of concern about the community's rather unstable financial situation have been ended for the moment by this improvement, brought about by reduced expenses for physical services as well as by a modest increase in subscription. It's a one-time boost—at least, we hope so!—and we're aware that it has come at a cost to the churches who usually host us, but it is somewhat reassuring to have better reserves than we're used to.

Meetings of the community's council have taken place remotely over the year with no disruption and with improved punctuality and attendance, though less cake. We're sorry to anticipate the resignation of Wendy and Norman Crane. They have given the council sterling service. Norman has not only served as chair but has been a key figure in educating both children and adults in our community, and Wendy was for many years a committed Cheder teacher. We thank him and Wendy very much for their long service. We would like to thank Stefano Giossi for his excellent work as both treasurer and membership secretary, as well as all our other council members for everything they contribute.

One topic we have been discussing at recent council meetings has been an approach from the Board of Deputies of British Jews suggesting we might send a Deputy to their meetings. We are still undecided about this and will share our discussions with the membership before we reach a final decision.

One innovation not actually due to the pandemic has been the division of the chair's responsibility between four co-chairs, colloquially known as The Sofa. This was necessary in the absence of anyone willing to take on the chair's role alone, however, the arrangement is working well and enabling us to take on more than just one person would be able to do. If you haven't noticed the difference, we're not doing too badly. We are acutely aware of the need to plan for the future of our community, and look forward to welcoming newer and younger members onto the council in the coming year, as well as to creating many opportunities for all members and friends of our community who want to, to get actively involved.

Sue Bard, Maurice Naftalin, Gillian Raab and Nick Silk

Religious affairs

The chairs' report, unnecessarily, that this has been a year like no other. Our normal pattern of services, sanctified by years of tradition, was completely overturned early in the year by the lockdown and, apart from a short period at the close of 2020, there has been no foreseeable prospect of meeting again in person. However, we have been immensely fortunate in Rabbi Mark who, without missing a beat, began a schedule of weekly services for Erev Shabbat, for Shabbat morning, and for Havdalah. Likewise every festival has been celebrated in full, even the High Holy Days which initially seemed like an impossible problem to reproduce online. It's possible to list only a few of the noteworthy aspects of our services in 2020:

- the introduction of Havdalah, which attracts a small but faithful (possibly addicted?) followers to this beautiful closing of Shabbat and return to the weekday
- the combination of the Edinburgh and Leicester communities and later the Manchester community
- the number of significant visitors who took whole services or parts of services
- the number of connections with other communities
- the marking of significant secular events and 'happenings' of the day and the continuous incorporation into our services of history and context
- creativity with the form of the service, including the use of other siddurim and creativity in how Siddur Lev Chadash is used
- strong interfaith influence
- greatly increased participation of the congregation
- the number of different tunes that we've been introduced to, perhaps because the lead singers feel released from the constraint of choosing only "well-kennt" tunes.

Highlights of the year have included:

- services commemorating the 75th anniversary of VE Day, with Rabbi Professor Jonathan Magonet delivering a d'var torah, and Rabbi James Baaden presenting a programme of music from the spring of 1945
- services streamed from Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue, from Rabbi David Maxa of Prague, from the LJ Biennial, and from Finchley Progressive to celebrate Gay Pride
- a service themed on the Black Lives Matter movement
- three services in which Rabbi Mark explained the structure and history of different parts of the service
- Torah services for the High Holy Days, taken—as tradition demands—by Rabbi Mark alternating with Rabbi Andrew Goldstein
- a service focussed on the cheder, and with the participation of the children—the first of many such, we hope
- a memorable discussion with Rabbi and psychotherapist Howard Cooper, on the occasion of Mental Health Awareness Shabbat.

Set against these riches are the lost experiences of our collective prayer. Two b'nei mitzvah have had to be postponed and, perhaps most grievously, our collective mourning for Mike Valencia z"l had to be restricted to an online shiva. These losses are very real, and we'll be overjoyed to regain some of them when the longed-for day comes for us to meet again. Our

challenge then will be to bring our newly far-flung community along with us in some creative synthesis of the different ways of meeting that we now know about.

Sue Bard, Maurice Naftalin

CHEDER

Cheder has adapted well to the new way of doing things, though we continue to learn and improve. When lockdown started in March, Mor started offering one session for all ages (but mainly directed at kids in Kita Bet). Once we had more planning time, we were able to build a team of teachers who started a much more organised zoom term in August.

Gila (also co-head of cheder), Katy, and Carmen teach Kita Alef. There are 9 children in this group ranging from nursery to p3, and they focus on learning about Jewish traditions and Hebrew letters, using crafts and stories.

Mor (also co-head of cheder) teaches Kita Bet with input from Dan. There are 9 children in this group between p4 and p6, and it focuses on Hebrew conversation and literacy, as well as traditions related to Jewish holidays and the way they are celebrated in synagogue.

George and Yael teach Kita Gimel, with 7 children. Kita Gimel is our pre-bnei mitzvah group, opening participants to a wide range of key topics in Jewish life through stories, history, texts, videos, discussion and practices.

In addition to regular cheder sessions, we held a successful zoom party for Hannukah and are planning a similar party in Purim and a pre-Passover children's Seder. We also collaborated with Rabbi Mark to engage the children in a special cheder focused Shabbat service.

To engage children, we have been sending packages with learning materials at the beginning of each term, as well as party packages for the holidays.

Mor Kandlik Eltanani

BURIALS

Sadly, I have to report that there have been two deaths this past year but that both burial arrangements have gone well.

Our dear friend and long-standing member Michael (Mike) Valencia passed away peacefully in November. Rabbi Mark officiated at the service held in the Dean Cemetery on the 26th of November 2020.

At the family's request Sukkat Shalom helped coordinate and assist with the burial of Hilda Bunyan who on the 1st of December 2020 was laid to rest in The Dean Cemetery. One of our lay leaders (Nick Silk) officiated at the graveside service.

We continue to have a good relationship with both William Purves Funeral Directors and the Dean Cemetery.

Ricky Hogg

MEMBERSHIP

Following the 2019 AGM, Sukkat Shalom has introduced associate membership, which allows anyone to participate in the life of our community regardless of the Jewish status. Associate membership is purely optional apart for all but those who join the Exploring Judaism group with the purpose of conversion. At the end of 2020, Sukkat Shalom had 19 associate members, all of them belonging to the study group.

As membership secretary and treasurer, I regularly review the membership list, and contact those members who have not paid their membership fees and haven't let us know that they are facing financial problems. It often happens that members simply forget to pay their membership fees. Getting in touch with members and following up payments are time-consuming tasks and can give rise to misunderstandings. For this reason, we strongly recommend members to pay their fees by signing up to our Direct Debit facility. Direct Debit has proved to be a helpful tool in significantly increasing the amount of fees collected, approximately £7000 more than in the previous financial year.

The count of people who were members at the end of 2020 is 109, a rise from 99 of 2019. The main reason for the increase is linked to people who have recently moved to Edinburgh, and to previous members of conversion classes who have acquired full Jewish status.

Stefano Giossi

Interfaith Matters

During the past year, as Treasurer of the Edinburgh Interfaith Association (EIFA) I have seen the association grow from strength to strength through the wider and deeper involvement of the Edinburgh Jewish community, including clergy and members from Sukkat Shalom. Some examples of this engagement include the following events and activities.

Rabbi Mark Solomon appeared on the weekly video podcast that is co-hosted by Professor Joe Goldblatt. 42 programmes have been broadcast this year and each features a Christian, Jewish (Joe Goldblatt) and Muslim co-host. The programmes air on Tuesdays at 1pm on the EIFA Facebook page and YouTube. Rabbi Solomon discussed his call to the ministry and also how he advocates for fairness and equity within the Jewish community and through his interfaith activities.

Jane Ansell, vice chair of the Edinburgh Jewish Cultural Centre (EJCC) and founder of Sleep Scotland discussed on this same programme methods for improving the quality of sleep and the programmes offered by the EJCC.

Rabbi David Rose of Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation appeared on the EIFA Reimagining Faith programme with ministers from other faiths offered by EIFA to discuss how faith communities are reimagining worship during the covid crisis.

EIFA presented three programmes in commemoration of International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The first programme featured a holocaust survivor from New York city who is also the author of seven books about the holocaust. She was interviewed by students from George Watson College and a school in Rwanda that was founded by a Jewish woman. The second programme was an interview, conducted by Professor Goldblatt with the director of education at Auschwitz–Birkenau Museum and Memorial followed by an interview with the same students. The third and final programme was an interview with the director of the Shanghai, China Jewish Refugee Museum (where Professor Goldblatt is the vice chairman) and students from Trinity Academy in Edinburgh as well as students from Rwanda.

There was also a memorial tribute to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks that included the Lord Provost, the chair of the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, Rabbi Solomon, Rabbi Rose and others.

Professor Goldblatt has also represented EIFA and the Jewish community upon numerous interfaith on-line panels in the past twelve months, including the weekly Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Faith and Communities task force comprises of faith representative across Scotland. Joe has also participated in the city of Edinburgh Resilience Planning Task Force representing EIFA.

Sukkat Shalom is also represented on the West Lothian Faith Group by Nick Silk, who has participated in such events as the Group's 'Connecting' talks for Interfaith Week and helped with the Group's submission for the West Lothian Council's "Equality Outcomes" review.

Professor Joe Goldblatt (Treasurer, EIFA)

Communications

Sue Bard, Maurice Naftalin, Charlie Raab, and Gillian Raab, with input also from Rebekah Gronowski and Nick Silk, are together responsible for *Etrog*, our bi-monthly newsletter, and for what during Covid have become weekly reminders. In the absence of our previously weekly physical gatherings of one kind or another and the rapid generation of a plethora of local, UK-wide, and international online opportunities, our weekly reminders are an important source of up-to-date news, information, and invitations to register for what's on offer. As a result, *Etrog* no longer carries this kind of diary information.

Another result of lockdown has been our WhatsApp group, initiated and administered by Sue Lieberman which offers welcome light touch, informal contact and information sharing between users, often accompanied by photos, and an easy forum for newcomers to introduce themselves and for people to ask for help.

Etrog is, like our reminders, produced and distributed online, using MailChimp (an e-mail marketing service) , with print copies posted out to anyone who requests this. As ever, we have documented our cycle of festival celebrations. Poignantly, our Purim 5780/2020 festivities – our last physical gathering – figure in the March/April 2020 edition. But since then, we have celebrated all our festivals, devising new ways of doing so, and all documented in *Etrog*. These have including our online Passover seder, our profusion of sukkahs made with what was to hand, our daily online menorah lighting, focusing on a different household each night and lastly, to date, Tu B'Shevat – an example of a festival whose traditions are being created year on year and maybe particularly this year.

In *Etrog*, we have marked life events of our members – two births, two baby namings, and a wedding. Sadly, we have mourned two deaths. We have celebrated four admissions to Judaism and welcomed many new members to our community. We have followed our cheder's successful switch to online operation and recorded our interfaith connections. We have also had reports from travelling members of far-flung Jewish communities in Shanghai, Trondheim and Budapest and reflections on some of the major events of this year, including the Black Lives Matter movement, the anti-Asian racism that has disfigured part of the response to coronavirus and a series of articles and a call for action on the plight of the Uyghur people.

This year we've had many new contributors and new types of contributions to *Etrog*, such as our birds-eye view of the lives of others through a series of lockdown diaries, through our first ever food section and through the poetry of Ellen Galford and Lizy Smith. If I had to choose my one favourite, it would have to go to our new member, Willem Steele's unique, self-operating Menorah with a history, designed and made by his loving and inventive son, Graham. If you've missed it so far, read all about it here.

<http://projectmenorah.skynetdevlin.uk>

Sue Bard

ADULT EDUCATION

For most of this year adult education has been transmitted online by Zoom. While this has unfortunately excluded a few people who can't get together in this way, or prefer not to, it has included far more additional people who were formerly excluded from physical gatherings. It has enabled the Leicester, Manchester and Edinburgh communities to learn together and has allowed members and friends of all those communities who have never or rarely been able to attend classes and study groups because of where they live, or for other reasons.

Rabbi Mark responded to lockdown by immediately offering weekly, as opposed to monthly, study groups and these have been eagerly attended, with numbers holding up remarkably well, including during periods when lockdown was lifted. The range of students, with people of all ages attending not only from all over the UK but also from Germany, the Netherlands, the USA, South Africa, East Africa and South America is stimulating and refreshing in itself. All of this is possible because of Rabbi Mark Solomon's scholarship, energy, creativity and his inclusive approach to learning and learners. Of course we miss physically being together, to say nothing of the tea and cake. But we are all agreed that when this becomes possible again we will continue to learn online as well

During the year Rabbi Mark has offered weekly study groups in Jewish Philosophy and in Talmud, as well as a weekly (formerly monthly) 'Exploring Judaism' group for people interested in learning more about Liberal Judaism as well as those preparing for conversion. During the course of the year, the Jewish Philosophy group has been reading and discussing Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, completed in 1190. The Talmud group has been reading and discussing 'Gender Variance in Rabbinic Literature; *Nine Talmudic Readings* by Emmanuel Levinas; the question of 'Promised Land or Permitted Land' in the Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 34b -35a, and currently, 'Rabbis and Heretics' in the Bavli Sanhedrin 37a-39b.

Another advantage of virtual learning has been that The Ark (Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue) has generously opened its Biblical Hebrew classes to all Liberal Jewish community members and friends. The Ark offers four levels of weekly classes from complete beginners to advanced, taught by their Rabbis Aaron Goldstein and Lea Mühlstein. Many Sukkat Shalom members and associate members are taking advantage of these fantastic opportunities.

Sue Bard