

## **Hampstead Garden Suburb Synagogue: The Early 2000's**

Rabbi Livingstone's first year of office, in 2000, was marked by a determination to encourage younger members to take on active roles of leadership and responsibility within the shul organisation. This was to reflect the ever- decreasing age profile of the community. The membership continued to grow - nearly 2800 - and facilities were being stretched, often to breaking point, on High Holy days.

The shul now possessed a significant management structure, including 29 members of the Board (five Honorary Officers, twelve male members and twelve female members), a lay leadership team, ten committees which report to the Board, an administration team of four and the professional religious team comprising the Rabbi, Chazan, Assistant Rabbi, Headteacher of the Hebrew Classes and a fulltime Youth Director. With shul finances now secure and the greater part of revenues being retained locally, the Building Committee began considering whether to exercise our right to compel the head landlords to sell the lease of the site to the community. The lease had 36 years to run and, with membership at a high, the need to ensure long-term security was urgent. A financial reserve was set up to meet this contingency.

An extra dimension was brought to the community by the monthly Sephardi minyan organised by our own members who included a significant number of new members from Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Gibraltar and France.

Naomi Lerer succeeded her husband Barry as Youth Director. Having overseen the refurbishment and re-equipping of the Youth Centre, she created all exciting and popular programme for our youth - theatre outings, go-karting, ice skating, Friday night Onegim, a supper quiz at a popular Golders Green restaurant, a new Tae Kwando course, drama, aerobics and the annual Youth Shabbat celebrations.

*Hagan* magazine, under the dedicated and professional stewardship of Alfred Kleiman, was recognized as one of the best Synagogue magazines in the country. It has regularly attracted a variety of contributors – religious and secular – and rarely fails to entertain, amuse and inform. After the passing of Alfred in 2006, editorship passed into the capable hands of his wife Shirley. The annual Lvov concert - by now a landmark event in the annual events diary – raised over £35,000 for the invaluable work of the local community under the inspirational leadership of Rabbi and Mrs Bald.

A series of lectures given by our own members during the year highlighted the extraordinary talent within our

community. These included art lectures by Alan Cohen on Gauguin and Chagall and a particularly interesting retrospect on *The Lost Synagogues of London* by Dr. Peter Renton, whose book on the subject was widely admired, not least by many older members whose family roots went back to those smaller London communities.

By February 2001 a headline of the community's newsletter, *The Norrice Leader*, the creation of Derek Taylor, proclaimed: "*Congregation to reach 3000 in 5671*. Rumours of decline within the orthodox community were clearly exaggerated, at least in NW11 and N2, because membership had increased by 5% in each of the previous three years. Indeed the Sephardi Shamoon family took the membership level past that milestone late in 2001 and, although we boasted two members who had passed their 100<sup>th</sup> birthdays, the average age was well below that for the US generally. In Spring 2001, Rabbi Steven Gaffin became the new Community Director, focusing his efforts on the development of opportunities for students (about 600) and a similar number of young married couples.

A planned, a passenger lift to the upper floors, as well as additional office and communal activity space, together with the possibility of acquiring the long leasehold or freehold, meant that a major fundraising effort was needed. A sum in the region of £750,000 had to be raised in conjunction with the Norrice Lea Charitable Trust. Happily, this was achieved and, by 2002, the Trust completed the acquisition of a 2000 year lease of the site and major works of extension to the Shul building were undertaken. The new Harry and Gertrude Landy Gallery, formally opened in April 2002, has provided much needed additional, flexible space within the complex.

The newly-created area accommodates 200 congregants for services and is in much demand by the Sephardi, Hashkama and Bat Chayil services. Its modern aids provide facilities for conferences, lectures and seminars and the area is sub-divisible into smaller, more intimate areas. The *Tree of Life*, designed by Maty Grunberg and located in the shul vestibule, was formally commissioned. Here, loved ones are commemorated with leaves endowed in their memory. It also celebrates, births, Bnei Mitzvah and a golden wedding.

In June 2004, *The Norrice Leader* carried the following article: '*A new and much needed initiative for the 20s-40s has arrived – Chaverim (Friends). There had been rumblings from this very large section of the kehilla long before the group held its inaugural Kiddush a few weeks ago. The first manifestation of its potential came in the form of a Picnic in the Park one Shabbat last September. The introduction of the Eruv has had a great effect of bringing the youngsters out of the home and into the shul on Shabbat – the picnic celebrated that. 'Following on from that we decided to organize a further function – the result was the Tu b'Shvat Picnic in February', says Luce Dee, founding member of Chaverim. 'We soon discovered the advantage of involving several people in*

*the arrangements. Many people had been helping informally but now it is more organised.*

*"Chaverim is particularly dear to the Rabbi. He has supported them from the outset, is on the committee and involved in planning. They aim to achieve a closer sense of community for this age group.*

*'The Shul is now so big that if we can break it down into smaller chunks there can, hopefully, be more of a sense of belonging and association. This is not just about families. It is also about singles, young marrieds and children.' Chaverim have flourished and now have their own, family-friendly Minyan, once a month in the Landy Gallery, as well as several social events."*

By 2005, HGSS was the second largest community, in terms of membership, within the US family. Forty-three percent of the members were aged between 30 and 49, with over 1000 children on the membership list. Rabbi Stephen Sacks succeeded Rabbi Gaffin as Community Director. A research study was undertaken in an endeavor to understand and assess the needs of the community and to establish areas where improvement was required. Communication with the membership continued through weekly news sheets, emails, the biannual *Hagan* magazine and the quarterly *Norrice Leader*, now edited by Hilary Halter.

The election of a woman, Naomi Taub, as Vice Chair of the Synagogue, was a first for the community and a proper recognition of the years of enormous commitment which she, together with her husband, Bernard, had undertaken with quiet and modest efficiency.

After many years of devoted service and hard work, the Ladies Guild, led by Lily Goldstein, took well-earned retirement and handed over the majority of their most arduous tasks to *Nashim*, a new women's group, led by Michele Yamin- Joseph, which has proved most successful.

The HGSS Helpline, a new welfare group providing comprehensive caring services, was launched in March 2006. The Professional Team Advisory Committee (PTAC), under the Chairmanship of Alan Cohen, was also relaunched to provide best practice within a structured interface between the religious and lay professionals on a regular basis.

Over 200 children now attended the Cheder, under Headteacher Mrs Zippy Sufrin, making it the largest in the US family. In the summer of 2005, the Senior Classes, under Rabbi Howard Hirsch, achieved excellent grades in the Jewish Studies GCSE exams, while Kerem School and Kerem House both received excellent Ofsted Reports. It was promising to see that the new Youth Director, Chayali Fehler, was proving so successful that 45% of our children were actively involved in youth activities with a further 25% occasionally involved.

Adult Education thrived, close links continuing with the JLE, Aish, LSJS, seed and other learning groups. We were blessed with lecturers of the highest calibre and diverse expertise, including David Conway (Professor of the Philosophy of Religion), Lord Winston (presenter of TV series and author of book *The Story of G-d*), Karen Armstrong (former nun and feted theologian and author of *The History of G-d*), and numerous distinguished Rabbis including the Chief Rabbi, Rabbis Shmuel Lew and Abraham Levy. A communal Friday night dinner was addressed by guest speakers from the Yeshiva University. A series of explanatory services, running parallel to Shabbat morning services have become a regular and important feature of the Shul's efforts to reach out to our large and religiously diverse community.

In 2006, the readmission of Jews to England by Oliver Cromwell in 1656 was marked by events throughout the Jewish community. Locally, to mark the occasion on the designated Shabbat in June, Rabbi Ivan Lerner spoke from the pulpit and Rabbi Asher Flegg was guest speaker at a Seudah Shlishit. In September, Reverend Elkan Levy captivated a capacity audience at a special Seudah Shlishit with a talk on the negotiations between Oliver Cromwell and Menasseh Ben Israel of Amsterdam.

Also in 2006, at the Board of Deputies Community Media Awards, *The Norrice Leader* won in the Best Synagogue Newsletter category. In December, HGSS held an Evening of Entertainment with such diverse entertainers as Dave Schneider (seen on BBC's *I'm Alan Partridge* and movie *Mission Impossible*), a Paraguayan harp player, and a close up magician. The Shul aims to cater for all tastes - literally. Whisky tasting is one of the most popular pastimes of our members and it is no surprise, therefore, that our whisky tasting evenings have become a popular and regular event. The popularity of the Hashkama service was such that it was now taking place three weeks in four, with monthly Chaverim and Sephardi minyanim, in the Landy Gallery. In 2007, the Chaverim Minyan won the prestigious United Synagogue Communal Award.

By 2007 the membership had grown to 3200 and, with the median age of adult members being well under 50, the demands on Rabbi Livingstone increased accordingly. To assist him, and also to address the urgent needs of community development, Rabbi Anthony Knopf took up his duties as Community Director in April. His role being to develop and co-ordinate a comprehensive programme of educational, social and communal activities, with continuing emphasis on the greater involvement of younger members.

Activities for more mature members began in January 2003 under the name Daytime Activities for the Over Sixties, soon graduating to Daytime activities for the Over Fifties. On the arrival in our midst of Rabbi Anthony, in 2007, it became *The Norrice Seniors* and that is has remained ever since.