



ADDRESS AT THE 90th ANNIVERSARY LUNCH

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Sunday 2 March 2025
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

[1] In 1935, a notice appeared in *The Liberal Jewish Monthly* reading:ⁱ

A small committee, with Miss Gertrude Heilbron as the honorary secretary, has been working very hard in Hove and Brighton ... As a result, arrangements have been made for ... services to be held in a room in the Hove Town Hall [...A]pplications for seats have already been received from fifty to sixty people. There is hope of a permanent organisation being established.

And what a permanent organisation we are! Gertrude Heilbron's hard work paid off to an extent that must have been beyond her wildest dreams.

[2] I've been going through the archives and have found various pieces of memorabilia from our previous anniversaries – our golden jubilee in 1985, our platinum jubilee in 2005 – but 90 years really is an extraordinary milestone.

[3] The foundation of BHPS was inspired and supported by Rabbi Israel Mattuck, widely credited as the “*architect of Liberal Judaism*”.ⁱⁱ Rabbi Mattuck was the first minister of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London – the first rabbi of our movement – and as his biographer, Pam Fox, says, he was known for “*his headstrong and independent behaviour*”.ⁱⁱⁱ (That might give you some idea of how BHPS ended up taking to its heart rabbis such as Elli and myself.)

[4] Focussing so much of his energy outside his own shul might have been seen as a curious move, and directing it outside of London altogether might have been seen as actively eccentric. But he realised that this city held Jewish potential, and that there were people here who might otherwise have had no access to Jewish life. In his

ⁱ Quoted by Rabbi John D Rayner, “A holy congregation”, sermon 847 (8 March 1985).

ⁱⁱ Pam Fox, *Israel Isidor Mattuck: architect of Liberal Judaism* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2014): 199.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid: 79.

consecration sermon, he charged us with the following mission: “[*This*] synagogue has the task of explaining to the world the meaning and aim of Jewish life.”^{iv}

[5] That is a mission we have consistently fulfilled. We have often been seen as an outlier, and that should be a badge of great pride.

[6] In that very first service in 1935 – a service we will be re-enacting here on Saturday 17 May, so please start thinking of what 1930s costume you will be wearing – men and women sat together and prayers were read in English. That was, at the time, revolutionary. Nothing similar had ever before been done by Brighton’s Jews.

[7] In 1986, our member Ivor Miskin z”l played table tennis for seven continuous hours, here in the building, as a unique fundraiser. Perhaps more heroically, his wife Francine served seven continuous hours of refreshments to the spectators.^v

[8] When Sandra Walker became our chair in 1991, supported by Elizabeth Middleburgh z”l as vice-chair, *The Jewish Chronicle* declared: “Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue has elected its first ‘petticoat government’.”^{vi} Obviously, the idea that women could hold positions of leadership had not yet percolated the *JC*.

[9] In 1996, the *JC* published a column predicting that Rabbi Elli would “set back the cause of women rabbis ... by a millennium”,^{vii} yet she is now the matriarch of a generation of women and LGBTQ rabbis who are transforming Anglo-Jewry.

[10] Our renovation project, completed in 2015 and generously funded by our friends from the Crawley Liberal Jewish Community, gave us an inclusive and accessible building that is the envy of other faith groups in the city.

[11] As part of that, and as a service to the wider community, we had a defibrillator fitted outside the building. When it was stolen in 2017, Sandra Walker told *The Argus* that stealing a defibrillator was a

^{iv} Quoted by Rayner, *ibid*.

^v “Brighton”, *The Jewish Chronicle* (24 October 1986): 13.

^{vi} “Brighton: petticoat line-up”, *The Jewish Chronicle* (17 May 1991): 10.

^{vii} Chaim Bermant, “Same-sex spouses = non-kosher houses”, *The Jewish Chronicle* (11 October 1996): 10.



“shocking” crime,^{viii} deserving her place in the history books for that pun alone.

[12] In 2023, the online magazine *Vashti* singled out BHPS as one of the very few “*vocally trans-inclusive*” voices in a British Jewish community otherwise beset by transphobia.^{ix}

[13] Last year we became the first shul outside London to be awarded EcoJudaism’s coveted gold certificate.^x

[14] And, of course, at this moment of celebration, we’re not having a gala dinner or a black-tie do, but instead an ecologically-sound lunch using food saved from landfill.

[15] For 90 years, BHPS has marched to the beat of our own drum, but in doing so, we have been a shining example to the wider world of the meaning of Judaism, Jewish values and Jewish life.

[16] In Hebrew, the number 90 is written with the letter צ, which most notably stands for words such as צִדִּיק, צִדְקָה, and other such words with a theme of justice and righteousness. So, today, we give thanks for the righteousness and generosity of our founders; we celebrate the impassioned quest for justice of our present; and, since the traditional birthday blessing of עַד מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים, ‘to 120’, seems a little un-ambitious on this occasion, let us instead say: עַד מֵאָה וּשְׁמוֹנִים, to 180! כֵּן יִהְיֶה רְצוֹן, may this be God’s will.

^{viii} Harry Bullmore, “Defibrillator is stolen from synagogue”, *The Argus* (11 August 2019): <<https://perma.cc/SX2Y-KZKP>>

^{ix} Sasha Baker, “How transphobes became the voice of British Jewry”, *Vashti* (14 December 2023): <<https://perma.cc/3HQX-9RTH>>

^x Hannah Gillott, “Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue wins prestigious environmental award”, *The Jewish Chronicle* (9 July 2024): <<https://perma.cc/KY3P-68AJ>>

