

Farewell Speech – 28 July 2018 - Va'Ethanan - R Jeff Berger

Dear Friends,

It is impossible to try and sum up in 15 minutes or even 4,000 words the lessons of 7 ½ years as rabbi of Rambam Sephardi. If the time was spent just trying to thank all of you who helped create this community, we would be here for hours.

So please allow me to celebrate the achievements of this community in an essay and reflect personally on the magnificent opportunity you've generously afforded to Michie and me. [Please also let me apologise in advance, if after reading this there is anyone who thinks they should have been thanked but was inadvertently left out.]

In 2009, a few of you who had unsuccessfully tried to hold a Sephardi minyan in the Federation, approached the Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation to ask for their support. The result was that the Mahamad asked me to visit this up-and-coming community – Elstree & Borehamwood – in what is considered the fastest growing Jewish corridor in London.

After 14 months of holding Shabbat services on a rotating basis (in alternation with Wembley Sephardi & Bevis Marks), the Mahamad asked our family to relocate here. In those days the Thameslink worked much better than it has of recent, and on one visit there was a snowstorm at the end of Shabbat. Michie and I just managed to catch the last train back to West Hampstead before the transport links shut down.

And so, we moved to Chandos Road in January 2011. Coincidentally, that month my father died.

Danny Couciero was president and Paul Pritchard was the treasurer. In late 2010 during one of the monthly visits, Danny mentioned they'd decided to call this the Rambam Sephardi Synagogue. Though it proved to be a good choice, using the word Sephardi seemed unnecessary to me. Surely everyone knew that the great sage, Rambam, was Sephardi.

In those days we were under the mentoring guidance of Rabbi Dr Abraham Levy OBE and Rabbi Israel Elia who ensured we knew the correct minhag and halakhot for our nascent community. We were helped immensely by Elishama May & Tanya Seshold, and during our Launch Dinner by Simon Winters, the Misan family, Bettina Caro, Michelle Huberman and Edwin Shuker.

Nearly 8 years later, the Rambam name fits us well because Rambam was known for his enlightened middle path. He wrote that in every aspect of life one should aspire to the middle way. For example, we shouldn't be too greedy or too miserly, too sentimental or too aloof. Even with the trait of anger, one should avoid the extremes and be even-tempered.

This 'middle path' ethos was recently described by Rabbi Daniel Bouskila from California in his article *The Classic Sephardic Spirit*, as smoothly combining the secular with the religious.

During the 20th century, there were several leading rabbinic figures who elaborated on this. Here are 2 well-respected rabbis Rabbi Bouskila quotes – the Sephardi chief rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Ben Zion Meir Hai Uziel, and his lead student, the chief rabbi of Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, Rabbi Hayyim David HaLevi.

'Rabbi Uziel introduces his nine volumes of halakhic writings by stating:

In every generation, conditions of life, changes in values, and technical and scientific discoveries, create new questions and problems that require solutions. We cannot avert our eyes from these issues and say 'Torah prohibits the New', i.e., anything not expressly mentioned by earlier sages is ipso facto forbidden. A-fortiori, we may not simply declare such matters permissible. Nor, may we let them remain vague and unclear, with each person acting with regard to them as he wishes. Rather, it is our duty to search halakhic sources and to derive responses to currently moot issues. 1

One of Rabbi Uziel's greatest students was Rabbi Haim David Halevy (1924-1998). Rabbi Halevy served as Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Jaffa, and was the prolific author of multiple volumes on halakha and Jewish thought. Following the lead of his teacher, Rabbi Halevy wrote a legal position paper titled *On the Flexibility of Halakha*, where he wrote:

... [continuity of Judaism] is possible only because permission was given to Israel's sages in each generation to renew halakha as appropriate to the changes of times and events. Only by virtue of this was the continuous existence of Torah in Israel possible, enabling Jews to follow the way of Torah... There is nothing so flexible as the flexibility of halakha... it is only by virtue of that flexibility that the People of Israel, through the many novel and useful rulings innovated by Israel's sages over the generations, could follow the path of Torah and its commandments for thousands of years. 2

Both Rabbi Uziel and Rabbi Halevy advocate for the classical Sephardic fusion between tradition and modernity. Unlike the liberal denominations of Judaism, they view halakha as a keynote feature of Jewish religious expression. But different than the trend of strictness characteristic of Orthodoxy, they believe that the modern world and halakha are not mutually exclusive, rather they are quite compatible. It is the responsibility of the rabbi to interpret halakha in a manner that reflects the meeting ground between tradition & modernity.

Rabbi Uziel commented on this in a broader sense:

Our holiness will not be complete if we separate ourselves from human life, from human phenomena, pleasures and charms, but only if we are nourished by all new developments in the world, by all the wondrous discoveries, by all the philosophical and scientific ideas which flourish and multiply in our world. We are enriched and nourished by sharing in the knowledge of the world. 3

Not only must halakha be compatible with the modern world, but so, too, must the Jew who lives in the modern world. Dating back to the Golden Age of Spain, the milieu of Sephardic Judaism always sought to embrace the wider world without losing its own uniqueness and traditions. This approach to life is one of the hallmarks of classic Sephardic Judaism.

In recognizing that there is a wider world than the insular Jewish community, Sephardic Judaism and its rabbis were well known for their concern for the social welfare of all human beings. Hand in hand with the internally Jewish system of halakha came a broader range of teachings that addressed the well-being of humanity.'

1 Ben Zion Meir Hai Uziel, *Mishpetei Uziel, Volume 1* (Tel Aviv: Levitzky, 1934), IX-X

2 Haim David Halevy, *Aseh Lecha Rav, Volume 7* (Tel Aviv: The Society for the Publication of Rabbi Halevy's Works, 1986), 235-238

3 Ben Zion Meir Hai Uziel, *Hegyonei Uziel, Volume 2* (Jerusalem: The Society for the Publication of Rabbi Uziel's Works, 2008), 133-134

Michie reminded me that Rambam was also a physician who composed a diet based on the medical advice of his day. But, for our purposes, probably one of the most impressive results, is that when Googling the word 'Rambam', our synagogue appears 2nd from the top of the list!

Early Days at Allum Hall

The early days were hard. We had no members and there was lots of heavy lifting. Literally! Uri reminded us that he would borrow a Sefer Torah from Lauderdale Road on Friday and return it after the weekend. The same with Festival books, someone had to drive to collect them. Only after we began meeting in Allum Hall regularly and they allowed us to build a small storage closet, did we manage the loan of a Torah which stayed throughout the week. Until we moved to Yavneh College, if there was an occasion when Allum Hall wouldn't be large enough, like a bar or bat mitzvah, we had to move everything to the Library or elsewhere and then back again.

The hardest part in the beginning was a low level of volunteer support and a limited financial budget. The annual cost of running the synagogue was about GBP 45,000.

We should be ever grateful that the Spanish & Portuguese funded us for 3 years until March 2014 – in effect laying out GBP 135,000. Even afterwards, their membership, were some of our largest supporters at fund-raising dinners.

During those initial 3 years we attracted families one-by-one who despite our lack of a building or proof of permanence, invested their faith and joined us for prayers and activities.

By April 2014, we had 22 families and becoming independent was a bit frightening. Would we be able to grow this small community further or not? There wasn't much of a financial cushion but the Board asked me to continue trying.

At Allum Hall, it was also a struggle some weeks to get a minyan. Thankfully, David Chriqui, Danny & Oliver Hazan, Ralph Levy and others helped round up the troops. And the Wahnons were steadfast supporters, including Abe's parents.

Not everyone liked the S&P nusakh but most were comforted by simply having a service of our own with an open atmosphere. We didn't ask the level of observance or where a person lived. Services were held on Shabbat morning and Festivals. In summer, at year-end and during school holidays we sometimes had to wait until 11:00am to get a minyan. On those occasions, David or Moishe Gotlieb might even go outside to the entrance of Allum Lane and divert people who were on their way elsewhere. Stanley Lerner, Saul Solomon & the Alizades became regulars that way.

A Melting Pot

It was a very multi-cultural group. Participants had ancestors who came from Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Yugoslavia, Italy, Greece, Spain & Portugal, Rhodesia and South Africa – which countries have I left out? That didn't include countries of our Ashkenazi members.

Leading such a group, which included at times; encouraging, pressuring, negotiating with and simply trying to inspire this diverse community – has been a 24/7 task. It

has been the first thing I woke up to and the last thing that kept my attention every day – for more than 2,500 days.

This included hosting more than 1,000 people in our home for meals, writing 260 weekly Mailchimp newsletters, answering 7,000 e-mails and WhatsApp messages per year (over 50,000 in total!).

And this doesn't include baby naming's & brit milah, bar & bat mitzvah lessons, celebrations & parties, funerals & stone settings or ordinary pastoral consultations of one form or another. It's been an honour to have been part of the growth of this community; to have one by one earned your trust, and to have tried to my full capacity to be of help.

To be entirely clear, none of this could have happened without the tireless dedication of my amazing wife, Michie. Many of you know this, but for the few who don't, after a full day at work which usually begins with a 7:00am train into London (or earlier), the indefatigable Mrs B comes home around 8:00pm in the evening, has a bite to eat, and then spend hours cooking in the kitchen. We seldom get to bed before 1:00am. And for this, she receives no salary, and in fact does just the opposite – she gives endlessly and tirelessly of herself to Rambam.

Together, we built this community, to a large degree, at the expense of the attention that should have gone to our own children. I pray they will learn to forgive us!

The Rambam Sephardi Board

Our growth to more than 60 families and more than 100 children – mostly under age 10 - wouldn't have happened without the help of many other dedicated people - but especially several figures on the Board. It seemed that as we grew and faced new hurdles, the Almighty always sent us more dedicated expert helpers.

In the early days, everything seemed to fall onto my shoulders. Daniel Couceiro took on the liaising work within Borehamwood, persuading people to join us and support our work. Ralph & Juliet Levy guided us in the tradition of the S&P minhag and in practical and creative ways. But the rest fell onto my plate. Then one day Derek Sheena arrived and told me to let others take ownership and be responsible, rather than trying to do everything ourselves. What a relief!

Lea Misan joined us early on. After her oldest son's bar mitzvah, she helped form the strategic planning and psychological underpinnings of the community. Brian Kaye took on the logistics management and team building and now communications, Rivka David brought us her intense creativity. What a blessing!

Joe Arazi helped with our legal issues, particularly during the early years when we tried to acquire permanent premises, until being drawn over to the Board of HJPS. Moishe Gotlieb brought credibility to our Religious Committee and eventually recruited Gary Somers as well. David Albohayre lent his expertise in property and business, taking on the role of scout and fund-raiser, and his charming wife Lynn audited our charity accounts. Michael Hilsenrath agreed to bring his experience from local synagogue boards to Rambam, and for the past almost 5 years, Dr Nathan Hasson from Wembley Sephardi added his passion & vision of what our community could become.

We had lots of late evening meetings, dreaming of owning a building, starting a Sephardi Centre and more. But always at the core was an ethos of unconditional, non-judgmental acceptance and love for all those who wished to help us build.

We tried our hardest to make room for everyone, regardless of level of observance, because we understood that, like in nature, biodiversity is better than mono-culture. To accommodate the Sephardi backgrounds of a mini (not always) 'United' Nations, we prepared themed meals and cooked together. We began showing films, playing Shesh Besh, having BBQs and more.

Then something remarkable happened. The babies arrived. Then we began to like each other more and to feel like a big family. We shared hospitality amongst ourselves, cooked food for families who had just given birth, watched our toddlers grow, and began providing children's services and activities. Soon we realised that we were greater together as a community than we could be as individuals, and we learned to respect & appreciate each other. We became '*a small Kehilla with a Big Heart*'. And while not always obvious to others, to me it was clearly divinely inspired!

From 2013 until we moved to Yavneh College, we developed our annual calendar which is anchored around 5 key events; our Tu B'Shvat fruit festival, our Megillah reading and Purim play, our Lag LaOmer Bonfire & Archery, our Summer BBQ, kindly and annually hosted by Neville & Natalie Levy, and Camp Rambam.

In July 2016, we moved to Yavneh College which opened up vast new horizons. Yavneh is a great blessing. Our relationship allows use of classrooms on weekday evenings and their industrial kitchen is astounding. We've cooked Sephardi themed meals, hosted Shabbat with Rabbi Dweck and even received a visit from HE Mark Regev, the Israel Ambassador. We no longer worry about having our own building.

Sadly, July 2016 coincided with my mother's death.

Our Volunteers

Once a buzz started to form around Rambam, a new wave of volunteers began to come forward. Rambam Sephardi became a community that could 'punch above its weight-class'. Today, we would be nowhere without our most devoted volunteers!

Like Yigal & Lynn Samuels who help set-up the synagogue each week and tidy up after Kiddush. Like Rimonit, Ety, Lisa and many others, who put out the delicious Kiddush that we provide after services. Like Natan Servi who almost exclusively provides our security support. Like Dan Benveniste who provides IT advice. And, all those like Yuval & Iris Cohen, Dani Cohen, Aida Benhamu, the Rosses, Solomons, Feldmans, those who help with Camp Rambam or any other of our signature events. The hiring of Raphael Lavi as Torah Reader brought us to yet another new level.

Children's services began as a necessity but grew organically because of friendships formed during summer camp. Elements in our adult service were aimed at getting children more involved. One of my favourite moments each week is when the children come into the sanctuary to sing Yimlokh.

It brings me great pride to be associated with this aspect of Rambam Sephardi. And now, the community is ready for a stage of growth for which, I believe there are more suitable successors.

With our recent accelerated growth, we've had a significant struggle over Nusakh – which words we use when we pray. The community is now going through a phase of defining its characteristics. This is a crucial task. Whereas previously an identity might have been imposed, now members will have the opportunity to choose.

How will we train our children? What role do we see for women in our community? What additional social and religious services do we need to offer our members? Do we prefer to be an independent community or an affiliate of one of the larger umbrella organisations? What kind of rabbi do we wish to have?

Just to set the record straight, and contrary to anything that may have been written or said, it is not out of neglect or indifference that I step back as rabbi, but out of a genuine love for this wonderful Rambam Sephardi community, and with respect and great hope for the choices and opportunities that lie ahead.

Personal Reflection

Today is also an opportunity to express deep appreciation for the opportunity you've given Michie and me, and for the comfort and support my family have received from our community. As mentioned, both my parents passed away during the last 7 years and our children have been bat & bar mitsvah. Your friendship through the ups and downs has been unwavering.

Remarkably, this was my first pulpit. You've heard the joke, why did Adam HaRishon live so long? Because he had no mother-in-law to aggravate him. Perhaps that was one of the attractions of Rambam, that there was no predecessor to be compared to.

A respected colleague told me this week, that it was a herculean task to create a community from nothing (*Yesh-MeEyin*). He said that many rabbinical colleagues in the UK acknowledge with admiration our achievement, knowing that most rabbis start with an existing entity (*Yesh miYesh*), whereas we built entirely from scratch!

For me, it has been a singular privilege. Regrettably, trouble with the strength and clarity of my voice, has been compounded by some minor physical limitations that have grown over the past years and now require attention.

Health notwithstanding, it's been heart-warming to be invited into your lives. It has also been deeply rewarding to have to prepare a weekly sermon and a newsletter - to open us up to ideas of the spirit and to a spiritual way of life.

Overwhelmingly my intention from the start was to create both an atmosphere of decorum and a sacred space where we could meet with the Divine. In part I felt it my duty to stimulate new thinking as well as deeper feelings. The path we've presented is centrist, modern orthodoxy. The aim was to inspire you to find a compassionate heart and to acquire intellectual honesty.

Through sermons, we shared our concerns about the unfolding world around us, about the decade-long economic downturn, about the fear unleashed by local acts of terror in 2016-17, about the Grenfell Tower tragedy, the uncertainties of Brexit, and more; even day-to-day issues affecting our lives from how to secure school places for our children, housing affordability, and even local traffic congestion.

We asked, what is the ultimate meaning in life? We pushed beyond our comfort zones to see how the message of Judaism could be shared with the wider world. From this grew my interest in interfaith relations.

Thanks to your support it's been possible for me to accept international fellowships and develop friendships with people from other faiths in many countries around the world. You may like to know that our glow-in-the-dark Rambam Sephardi badged rubber wrist bands have made it to the far corners of the earth!

Blessing

And so, hopefully looking around the room, you will agree, that we've had great success. This community is robust and capable of making its own decisions going forward, it is dynamic and growing ... because of lots of your hard work. To use a Biblical reference, we're no longer the stiff necked rag tag group who exited Egypt but the committed corps ready to enter the Promised Land.

And thankfully, we're still a warm, welcoming, non-judgmental, inclusive community. Please continue to be good to each other and thrive.

While it seems I have no idea what my next post will be, and you have no idea who your new rabbi will be, let's join together to recite a Shehehyanu blessing.

May the Almighty bless us to continue growing spiritually and communally! May we each find a way in which to express our love for the Divine and our compassion for others, always seeking an intellectually honest understanding of who we are and what our faith and our conscience requires of us!

A Recurring Dream

Dr Nathan Hasson often says how he struggles before having to speak publicly – sometimes to the point that it effects his dreams. Well, after becoming a rabbi in 2009 and more importantly, once we moved to Borehamwood in 2011, for years there was a strange recurring dream that would wake me from sleep.

It came every few months, sometimes more frequently. To the best of my recall it went like this ... somehow I had found a discarded old-style double-decker London bus with keys in the ignition and, with boyish enthusiasm decided to give it a spin, eventually parking it on a quiet wooded road not far from my house. No one seemed to miss it. In subsequent versions of the dream, I taught myself how to identify the features, to turn corners better, to operate the cash box, and even managed to go back to find its regular route.

In this dream that felt so real, each day I would go out in the bus and come back at night, without anyone realising I was neither licensed or authorised to transport people on that route - yet passengers got on and got off and all seemed to go well. However, there was always a point in the dream where I grew increasingly concerned that an official from the bus company was about to catch me. And that sensation would wake me up.

Interpretation & Closing

About 4 months ago, listening to a brilliant lecture by Professor Martin Goodman about the History of Judaism, it dawned on me what this dream was about. You see I'd never had an 'induction' to become rabbi of Rambam Sephardi. Much of our early history was quite hectic and haphazard. For the longest time, we simply worked flat out to do whatever the situation and circumstances required. And as many of you know, neither was I born Sephardi.

The bus of course symbolically represented the Rambam community and the passengers were you and others who were sharing the journey with me.

Have no fear, my Semikha from Montefiore College is valid. But, serving a community was something I had little experience with and required constant improvisation, support from mentors and much Divine inspiration.

And so, it has been a remarkably enjoyable journey to be your bus driver. And now, like that niggling fear in my dream that was always just beyond tangible, it is time for me to return the keys to their proper authority ... or at least for the time being to the Board of Trustees.

At risk of having left someone or something out, please let me close here.

On behalf of Michie and our family, and with thanks to all who are present today or have helped in the past, from the bottom of our hearts, thank you & Shabbat shalom!