

8: The Great and the Good: United Synagogue outreach

Jews remember. This is our continuity. But we also forget. The tall black building next to the school was from around 1690 the site of the Great Synagogue, Duke's Place, accessed until the early 1800s through the Gothic arch of a long-dissolved priory. Here, in May 1941, a bomb was dropped which destroyed that synagogue entirely. It might never have been here, any more than the monks who preceded it. Even the blue plaque is gone.

Few remain who can themselves recall the veneration and affection commonly felt for this place by the time of its demise, the oldest site of Ashkenazi worship in the United Kingdom. The shul, where the first generations of readmitted English Ashkenazim had trickled in from Amsterdam, from the Judengassen, of Frankfurt and Hamburg, and from Poland.

The shul which assembled the first Ashkenazi Chevra Kadisha for hundreds of years, providing Jewish burials. Where the sons of King George III visited in 1809, and after the United Synagogue was formed in 1870, the shul which provided the official pulpit for the Chief Rabbi, and which therefore became the mother community for the British Empire.

Dayan Yehezkel Abramsky, head of the London Beth Din and a world-class halachic authority, would doven here every Shabbat after his appointment in 1934. Through its connection with the Chief Rabbinate and with Dayan Abramsky, the Great Synagogue remained a shul of the highest communal standing into the 20th century, the declared Cathedral Synagogue of the US. And according to one congregant in her recollections, one of the jewels in the crown of the East End. Four months after the destruction of the building, up to 3,000 people, Jews and non-Jews, crowded the area around the ruins for a service of intercession led by the Chief Rabbi.

Long before World War II though, Jewish life in London had already shifted decisively towards neighbouring areas, Hackney, Mile End, Dalston, and to the purpose-built suburbs, including Bayswater, Maida Vale, Highbury, and West Hampstead. Rather than mine the history of the Great Synagogue over two and a half centuries, we might ask instead how this traditional city synagogue, designed and maintained to be a home for all the Ashkenazim of London, became the foundation stone on which the US was built. Acknowledging the movement of its wealthier members westward, the Great Synagogue

in 1848 established a satellite community in Wigmore Street between Regent's Park and Hyde Park.

This became the Central Synagogue. Within 20 years in 1863, another synagogue was opened. This time among the handsome stucco terraces of Bayswater, as a joint project of both the Great and the New Synagogues. Due to the influence of the old communities on the new, the West End Shuls contributed to the great charitable commitments of the city congregations.

There isn't normally an exciting phrase. We must credit the pioneering joint committee of the Great and New, established to run the Bayswater Synagogue, for pointing the way to a new level of communal organisation. The formal creation of Act of Parliament in 1870 of the US by the Great, New, Hambro, Central, and Bayswater Synagogues is a landmark. Not just in the organisational history of British Jewry, but in all seriousness, in the history of Jewish communities everywhere, and not because of the prestige of having official inky parchment origins in Westminster.

The Ashkenazim of London had overcome the entirely rational but defensive and limited ambitions of their predecessors. Without hubris or rashness, the aims of the new organisation went beyond meeting the needs of its existing members, its primary function. The US determined, in addition, not to reject, but to attempt, however falteringly and imperfectly, to absorb growing numbers of conspicuously foreign, very un-British Jews.

The US set out to provide for these Jews, and to eradicate any sense of inferiority of financial and religious organisation, decorum, or quality of clergy that might cause a British Jew to blush. The Anglo-Jewish Association said that, in the Jewish community, until an almost recent period, one half of the community did not know how the other half existed. To diminish this un-Jewish state of affairs and embodying a new spirit, the US as a team soon founded its first community. Not for the growing suburbanite population, but in Rector Square in Stepney, as a mission synagogue, so to speak, to unite Jews of all stripes under one organisation with personal and communal improvement as the justification.

Despite the sometimes-cloudy Victorian language and formality that obscure the creation of this outpost of orthodoxy in 1877, the East London Synagogue was nevertheless an ambitious, optimistic, and brave new venture. Like Mill Hill East,

Hatfield, or Borehamwood East today, it was a US community of potential. It was a good bet.

Some estimates hold that 20,000 weddings were held at this one shul. But this isn't as important as the new, expansive approach taken by the US, different from anything else in the world then and now. This is definitely something we should remember.