

## Report of the Chairman of BRS Board to AGM 14<sup>th</sup> March 2017

The Board has held 8 meetings since the last AGM and has also made some decisions using email. The Executive has convened by videoconference as needed. Board members unable to attend meetings in person have been able to join by videoconference, which has worked quite well though one or two additional microphones on the tables would help audibility for those on line. Many of the items discussed by the Board are described elsewhere in this report and of course in the Treasurer's report. However, I would like to mention a few subjects, which don't belong to any particular committee and some of which were the subject of important Board discussions.

- Discussions took place within the Education Committee and the Board on the procedure for recognition of **equilineality** (the principle that the children of a Jewish man and non-Jewish mother should be recognised as Jewish in the same way as the children of a Jewish mother). There was no objection to the principle but it was felt strongly that the procedure laid down by the Assembly of Rabbis for the recognition of a child's Jewish status had some very undesirable consequences. As the result of these discussions the Board approved the policy in Appendix 1 of this report. Another area of concern was the very divergent views about the principle of equilineality within the Reform movement in which some synagogues reject the principle altogether, while others, like ourselves, accept it completely.
- It was brought to the attention of the Board that the MRJ intended to pass a resolution that would renew the current **levy of most synagogues (including BRS) to the MRJ** at 16.5% of net subscription income. The exceptions are the very smallest communities, which have a reduced contribution according to a sliding scale and the very largest for which a cap on the levy has been operating for some years. This cap, currently stands at £128,000 and effectively means that the largest and wealthiest synagogues contribute a lower percentage of their subscription income than most of the other synagogues comprising the MRJ. As the result of discussions between the Chairmen of a number of synagogues and the MRJ Chair and Treasurer, a working party has been established to discuss the issue. The first meeting of the working party was held on the 7<sup>th</sup> March 2017 and it is expected that a recommendation will be made in time for the AGM of the MRJ in June.
- The main **charitable fund-raising** conducted by the shul is the Kol Nidre Appeal. Last year, in addition to the shul itself, the Board chose to support the Leo Baeck Educational Centre in Haifa, Nightingale Hammerson based in Wandsworth and Bromley food bank. A total of £10,700 was raised before gift aid. The policy of the Board has been to use the gift aid from one year's fund-raising to support the following year's charities on a pro-rata basis. However, during the year a newly established Bromley Three Faiths Forum (3FF) came to the fore with active involvement of Al-Emaan mosque in Keston, some local churches and our shul. In light of the refugee crisis, the 3FF decided to support the refugees in Calais and the Board of BRS agreed to use some of the gift aid from last year's KN Appeal to donate £1,000 to 'L'auberge de migrants'. Plans to take a group of volunteers to Calais had been overtaken by the French government's decision to close the camps and instead supplies were sent through the group called 'Calais Action'. The principle of the use of gift aid for such discretionary charitable donations is the subject of a motion on this AGM's agenda.
- The price of High Holyday tickets for visitors was discussed at the Board. Family and friends of members and students are always welcome and are not charged though they often make generous donations. On the other hand, a few visitors have attended High Holyday services year after year without having any direct connection to the shul and with no intention of becoming members. Our charge of £25 for such visitors is far less than that of other synagogues; it was therefore decided to raise our charges to £75, £150 and £300 on the first, second and third successive years respectively.
- A half-day course on basic life support was held in the shul; those attending found this very valuable instruction. It was agreed that we should purchase a defibrillator and more than £900 was raised from members for this purpose. With addition of gift aid, this was sufficient to cover the cost and the defibrillator has just been delivered. It is hoped that further training sessions will be held with involvement of more members.

## **Security**

As we all know, the security of our members and our children when attending services, cheder, social centre and other activities in the shul is of paramount importance. Security for our Saturday morning services is provided by a dedicated and reliable team of about 25 members. Most of us have undergone some training from the CST. Cheder does require the services of a professional security firm, complemented by parent volunteers. Funding for this had been made available from the CST in 2015 and the grant expired in April 2016. Around that time the CST informed us that no grant would be available for 2016-2017. I am pleased to say that strongly worded correspondence with the CST Grants Committee resulted in money being made available to cover most of our costs for cheder security for the past year. The security situation overall in the UK is deeply concerning with CST reporting a total of 1,309 antisemitic incidents in 2016, which is a 36% increase over the 960 incidents recorded in 2015 and is a record high total. CST currently records a monthly average number of antisemitic incidents more than twice that which prevailed 4 years ago. Our security procedures are not tokenism, they are our response to a real threat. I would like to express my sincere thanks to all our volunteers and particularly to Graham Harris for heading up our security group and for always making himself available to fill in gaps when they occur.

## **Building maintenance**

There has been considerable activity relating to our building in the past year:

- Thanks to a most generous donation, we have been able to take up the old stained and worn carpet in the garden room and replace it with an acoustic polymer floor which is very hard wearing and easy to keep clean; the garden room was also decorated.
- Owing to water damage over a long period, the doors from the garden room to the patio had rotted. They have been replaced by new aluminium doors and appropriate changes have been made to the ramp so that water will drain away.
- Thanks are also due to the many members who donated money for purchase of new stacking chairs for the garden room. These were purchased recently and the old ones have been disposed of.
- With financial help from the CST, we have had new higher fencing, which includes an area for the dustbins behind doors, making the area cleaner, tidier and more secure.

Thanks are again due to Graham Harris who continues to take responsibility for building maintenance.

## **Education Committee – Barbara Kurtz**

With regard to regular adult education, the Rabbi concluded his 'Basic Judaism' course in May, and, as a number of prospective converts went to the Beit Din, study sessions changed to one-to-one classes. The Rabbi delivered a number of lectures on Sunday mornings, in particular a series on Maimonides and a look at Abraham. A fascinating talk on Crypto-Jews in Southern USA was given by Rabbi Stephen Leon. Talmud Study classes led by the Rabbi have been ongoing and resumed in February. John Posner's faithful students have celebrated their own "Simchat Torah" with reaching the end of Deuteronomy and are now slowly working their way through Genesis.

Our own psychiatrist, Dr George Stein, gave us another of his fascinating talks, this time looking at King Saul (preceded by delicious refreshments). We have been promised more talks as he finishes their preparation. Thank you, George. The Committee reintroduced Friday Night onegim, and were delighted to welcome Professor Bernie Cohen who attracted a large audience with his entertaining and informative talks on "The Origins of the Language" and the "Trouble with Easter".

Three major events were arranged during the year, attracting a lot of interest from the membership. In May we held our own EU Referendum Debate when we were very fortunate to have member Martin Wolf, Chief Economics Editor of the FT speaking for "Remain" and Bromley Councillor David Livett, UKIP, opposing him for "Leave". After very persuasive speeches from them and their seconders, and an animated Q&A Session, a show of hands showed BRS to be pro Remain – against the ensuing result, of course. Concert Pianist and Music Historian Dr Rachel Franklin, attracted a large audience who, following afternoon tea, gave us a fascinating insight into the part Jewish Composers played in "Magnificent Movie Music". Our Jubilee Lecturer for 2016 was Rabbi Dr Deborah Kahn-Harris, Principal of the Leo Baeck College, who spoke to us on the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of LBC, which has produced a long line of progressive rabbis including Lionel Blue, who passed away recently and our own Rabbis David Freeman, Sylvia Rothschild and Tony Hammond.

Marilyn Freeman continues to meet the ever- increasing demands of local schools, showing groups of children round the shul and giving them a lesson in basic Judaism which forms part of their school curriculum. She is supported by the Rabbi and Ann Fried, while Sandra Hurley looks after groups of cub scouts looking to add to their sleeveful of badges. Thank you to all of them.

The Education Committee also oversees our Cheder. Thanks go to Vicki Ashmore and all her teachers and helpers, who do such a splendid job. Thanks also go to Tracy Frankel and Sue Bowyer in the Gan who provide for the youngest children. The welcoming atmosphere they find here often leads to new shul members as the children move on to cheder. The shul is also contributing to our youth outside Cheder and the Gan. Attendance at Maccabi had waned in 2015 but Vicki Ashmore started our own group for children aged over 12 years and this has proved very successful. The group is attended by 10 to 15 youngsters once a month after Cheder. Recently Hayley Preston has replaced Vicki in this role and the group continues to thrive. Our thanks go to Vicki and Hayley.

Barbara thanks the Rabbi and all members of the committee for their hard work and enthusiasm over the year and I would like to thank Barbara so much for her great leadership and organisational ability.

### **Caring Community Committee: Pauline Jeffree**

The Committee meets as necessary and regular updates are distributed to the Synagogue Chairman, Rabbi, and Administrator but all information about individuals is kept strictly confidential. The South London Jewish Forum co-ordinated and led by Stephen Ison meets regularly at Nightingale Hammerson House. The meetings provide the opportunity to network and usually a topic of interest is presented and discussed. Age UK have regular meetings within the London Borough of Bromley which CC supports and Community Links circulate regular updates about volunteering, support for the elderly, frail and vulnerable and residents of Bromley with mental health problems.

The Committee keeps in touch with synagogue members by visiting, telephone, e-mail, sending greeting cards and of course letters to the bereaved. There are many members who like a home visit, in particular, those who are housebound, in hospital or residential care. The long-established 'telephone visiting' by a small number of individuals has meant that additional members have been contacted and feedback is provided to the Committee. Talking Highlight, the audio version of our monthly newsletter, is recorded, edited and distributed to a number of members each month.

The *Knit and Natter* group is made up of members of BRS and Catford Synagogue, residents from Park Court and personal friends; new members are always welcome. The group meets every 4-6 weeks to knit small jackets, hats, bootees, and mittens, make cot blankets, cot sheets, and incubator covers all for the very tiny and sick babies at King's College Hospital Intensive Baby Care Unit. Other soft toys are made to support the hospice movement and the Deaf Access charity

Since March, 2016, tea parties for the Alone and Lonely, in conjunction with Jewish Care, have been running monthly at Park Court, Pauline Jeffree's home. Co-ordinators and helpers from BRS have all been police checked and have undertaken the necessary training with Jewish Care. Average attendance is 7-10 friends from BRS, Catford Synagogue and Park Court with 2 helpers and 2 co-ordinators in attendance. The synagogue's transport fund is available and is used as required. Macmillan Coffee Morning is always such a happy and amazing event. The final amount collected in 2016 was £1,416.07.

### **Social Centre**

Our thanks also go to Dianne Matthews and her team of helpers who organise the programmes and cater for the elderly every fortnight in the Social Centre.

### **Comms Group**

As always, we are indebted to Bob Symonds for producing, without fail, our monthly Highlight newsletter and to Judi Sheffrin for our weekly e-light. We also thank Kieron Hyams who runs our excellent website.

### **Religion and Ritual – Dan Posner**

The R&R Committee continues to organise the festivals and Shabbat services and discuss key ritual matters. Many of the members also provide wardening support throughout the year and we have two new wardens Barbara Kurtz and Stephanie Alberti. The committee put on a mitzvah workshop on a Sunday morning which covered 'how to light Chanukah candles' and 'how to make Shabbat'.

Our Shabbat evening and morning services were led by the Rabbi and lay readers. Lay reading, a long standing tradition in BRS, has increased though there is more than we can do, helping to develop and nurture new participants. In a year filled with so many doubts and uncertainty the Rabbi gave some excellent sermons. Early in 2017 we were also blessed by the birth of Asher, the Holtz's first child which meant that Jason went on paternity leave. We are fortunate to have so many capable lay readers who read Torah and led services in his absence. Dan would like to thank the choir, wardens and those who organise and prepare Kiddush and who generally do so much to keep the services running to such a high standard. Our successful Children's services also continued - one each term - led by our Cheder Children. It is pleasing to see the Shul so full on these occasions. We also had a number of Bnei Mitzvah; the standard attained by young members of the community is extremely high and thanks are due to the students, their teachers as well as their parents.

The Communal Seder featured the first use of a new and excellent Hagaddah and was billed as being family friendly with an earlier start time. Unfortunately, this meant that some of the regular attendees did not attend which was a shame and is something which the R&R committee is looking to address this year. The Seder itself was a great success for the 70 plus participants who came, with plenty of laughter, wine and song.

Numbers of adults appeared to be slightly down on last year for the High Holiday services but we had a large number of children attending services on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The Study Session during Yom Kippur's Mussaf Service was once again well received as was the revised format for the Yizkor Service. There is a tremendous amount of work involved in allocating mitzvot, planning the services, schlepping and meeting and greeting. The lay readers, wardens and the Rabbi excelled and the services ran smoothly. As ever, the choir did a fantastic job, singing beautifully and leading the music across all the services. There had been much support at the 'Our Shul, Your Shul' event for an alternative to Crofton Halls. Whilst the option of back-to-back services in our own synagogue was considered, there were a number of key obstacles including capacity, implications for the choir and the fact that many members want the community to be united in time and place for High Holyday services. Whilst there were viable solutions to potential issues around parking, overall given the obstacles identified, the Senior Warden felt that he could not recommend the 'in house' option and the Board accepted Dan's recommendation not to proceed.

The Scroll was unwound during Simchat Torah accompanied by much music, dancing and copious food. Chanukah saw a myriad of activities including a highly successful fair which saw many stalls sell out and raised much needed funds towards the Shul. Thanks are due to Michelle Brooks-Evans for organising it and all the stall holders. On a cold Sunday morning in March, members of the Cheder and the wider community were transported to a night club for the Purim Spiel as cast members sang and boogied their way through Shushan Night Fever. Who knew it was possible to rock so hard before midday? And to bring us right up to date, this year's Purim was celebrated with reading of the Megillat Esther last Saturday evening and a brilliant spiel à la Grease attended by the whole cheder Sunday just gone organised by Hayley Preston.

### **The SE10 and Beyond group - Michelle Brooks Evans**

The group has continued to meet every 4 to 6 weeks. There are 48 people on the mailing list but the evenings are usually attended by between 8 and 15 members, and always have some sort of Jewish theme. The past year has included a book club evening with the author in attendance, an evening preparing Passover food, memories of High Holidays, the history of Yiddish, a picnic in Greenwich park in the summer and a visit to Bromley Little Theatre to see Kindertransport. The group is steady in numbers with an open policy to shul members and others just interested in their Jewishness. A positive outcome of this group is that many have found friends and have continued their friendship long term outside the group.

## **BR5&6 - Gloria Norman**

2016 was a memorable year for BR5&6 as the group celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary by leading the Shabbat Service in August. Other events included the annual trip down the Thames and even a visit to the new cinema in Orpington. The group enjoyed lunches and afternoon teas at favourite pubs and garden centres, a "Last Night at the Proms" evening at Nadia Gilman's and ended the year with a Chanukah Candle Lighting and shared supper thanks to Dianne Mathews. The group still enjoys the company and caring and welcomes members of the shul to any of their events.

## **Our late president**

I could not conclude this report to the AGM without mention of the passing of our president David Barnett. A memorial service for David was held in the shul on Sunday the 13<sup>th</sup> November 2016. Many words have been said and his loss is felt by so many of us. Suffice it to say that we are all indebted to David as well of course to Desiree for contributing so much over half a century to making our synagogue the thriving community it is today.

**My final thanks** go to Janet Burlen for her superb administration and last, but by no means least, to our Rabbi for the spiritual, educational, organisational and pastoral work and leadership he continues to give our community.

## **Appendix 1: BRS policy on the principle of equalineality and children attending Cheder**

1. It is a goal of Bromley Reform Synagogue that all members and their families, including family members who are not Jewish, feel welcome, included and valued.
2. BRS accepts all status decisions of the Beit Din of the Movement for Reform Judaism and status policies of the Assembly of Reform Rabbis UK as interpreted, understood and applied by the rabbi of Bromley Reform Synagogue, including the principle of inherited equalineal status. This means that the child whose father is Jewish but mother is not, will be treated in exactly the same way as one whose mother is Jewish and father is not. At the discretion of the synagogue rabbi, complicated cases may be referred to the Standing Committee of the Beit Din. All questions of status should be directed to the synagogue rabbi.
3. In accordance with previous practice, a child of a Jewish mother can be accepted into the BRS cheder after the mother has become a member of the synagogue. With the implementation of equalineality, this practice now applies to the child of a Jewish father as well. Generally, a parent or a responsible, legal guardian of the child must be a member of the synagogue before the child starts cheder. In the event that a parent or legal guardian is not a member, but another adult family member such as a grandparent is a member, then, with the permission of parents or legal guardians, that adult family member may request that the child be enrolled in cheder.
4. To become a member of the synagogue, a Jewish adult must complete a membership application form, make a subscription arrangement with the synagogue administrator or membership secretary and make an appointment to meet the Rabbi. Non-Jewish partners are encouraged to attend the meeting. All such conversations will be treated by the synagogue as confidential.
5. If it becomes apparent that the religious upbringing of the child / children is the subject of a major conflict between the parents, the Jewish parent still has the right to become a member.
6. The Board of BRS wishes to emphasise its belief that equalineality should be interpreted so as to extend rights to the children whose sole Jewish parent is the father, rather than restrict rights of a child whose sole Jewish parent is the mother.
7. Since there is disagreement within the Jewish community on a wide range of status issues, including equalineality, the rabbi will inform members and prospective members, when relevant, of this and be available to discuss various options.