CONGREGATION ALBERT RABBI SEARCH COMMITTEE
Getting to know Rabbi Celia Surget

View Rabbi Surget’s communications, including Shabbat services, High Holy Day Services, a Bar Mitzvah and more in these:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWOis8KeWtA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWOis8KeWtA)
Direct link to Shabbat morning service with a Bar Mitzvah on 10/31/2020, from the sanctuary with a brand-new streaming set-up. Rabbi Surget wants to assure you that she “tends sound better on the guitar when there are people around joining in loudly!”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRzJ8dh8rql](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRzJ8dh8rql)
Direct link to a Friday night service that had people dancing at home

[https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=radlett%20reform%20synagogue](https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=radlett%20reform%20synagogue)
View Rabbi Surget leading and co-leading additional services (including High Holy Day Services)

Listen to Rabbi Surget’s podcast appearances:

Rabbi Laura’s Podcast, August 28, 2020
What does diversity really mean in a religious setting? Why are marathons akin to prayer? Rabbi Celia Surget explains her role as Chair of Reform Rabbis and Cantors UK, and her rabbinic journey through four counties across two continents.

[https://open.spotify.com/show/0EicFtF3jgVPWKe40L2M4d](https://open.spotify.com/show/0EicFtF3jgVPWKe40L2M4d)
(You must join Spotify at Spotify.com to hear this podcast. There is no cost to join.)

Progressively Jewish Podcast, September 5, 2020
Season 1, Episode 15 “Acts of loving kindness in Judaism”
[https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9hbmNob3IuZm0vcy8zMDczZjM1NC9wb2RjYXN0L3Jzcw?sa=X&ved=0CAwQlvsGahcKEwJ0L3Jzw?hl=en](https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9hbmNob3IuZm0vcy8zMDczZjM1NC9wb2RjYXN0L3Jzw?sa=X&ved=0CAwQlvsGahcKEwJ0L3Jzw?hl=en)

Note: For your convenience, This ENTIRE document, with clickable links, is available on Congregationalbert.org in the “Journey to a New Rabbi” section.
Special Membership Meeting Agenda  
January 31, 2021 / 18 Shevat 5781  
BY ZOOM MEETING*  

Please turn off or silence cell phones, pagers, and other electronic devices.

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<td>Opening Prayer</td>
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Because of my upbringing, while I realised that there were other streams of Judaism that did not agree with or recognise the Judaism that I practice, I never considered that my Judaism was not mainstream and normative. In fact, it was not until I arrived in Israel for the first year of my rabbinic studies and our campus was vandalized, that I appreciated just how deep the misunderstanding and even hatred can be.

Fast forward to 2020-here I am, a committed, confident, strictly Reform Jew, with still very little experience of a non-Progressive service, and extremely aware of just how deep the divide is, how difficult the challenge is of promoting our stream of Judaism, how unknown and misunderstood it really is.

I have recently returned from the Union for Reform Judaism’s biennial conference in Chicago- the North American Reform Movement’ gathering which brings together nearly 6000 enthusiastic and dedicated Reform Jews. During one of the plenary sessions, Cantor Barbara Ostfeld, the first woman ordained as a cantor in 1975, was honoured for all of her achievements, and during her acceptance speech spoke of Reform Judaism as “mainstream Judaism”. It was the first time I have ever heard my Judaism defined as such. And it is true that in Northern America, Reform Judaism is the largest denomination- this translates into what I can only describe as an unapologetic practice of Reform Judaism- one which gives space to inspiringly forward thinking positions the movement might take on issues of society and an emphasis on a creative and experiential services and prayers. “Lo bashamayim hi” teaches Torah- “it is not in the heavens”, and we can also experience that unapologetic practice of our Judaism-it starts with shifting how we speak of it. We do not compare ourselves to other denominations to describe our Judaism, we should not define ourselves by them- we are mainstream; to quote singer/songwriter Elana Arian- “our voices are powerful”, and we deserve to have them heard.

*Join Zoom Meeting  
https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85289272374
Waste time, 
Kill time, 
For time is a gift that you give us, 
But a perishable gift, 
A gift that does not keep. 
God, I have time, 
I have plenty of time, 
All the time you gave me, 
The years of my life, 
The days of my years, 
The hours of my days, 
They are all mine, 
Mine to fill, quietly, calmly, 
But to fill completely, up to the brim.

Days are like scrolls, write on them what you want to keep.
Adapted by Rabbi Allen Maller from a prayer by Father Michael Quoist

A few days ago, on Shabbat, we read from parashat Vayeleich which can best be described as the beginning of the end. We are reaching the conclusion of the Torah narrative, and the Israelites are instructed to place the Sefer HaTorah beside the Ark of the Covenant which also contains both set of tablets on which are inscribed the Ten Commandments. One set is whole; the other was broken when Moses threw it on the ground after discovering the golden calf. And so, in one sacred vessel, we find contained our history and our heritage, and our brokenness carefully kept alongside that which makes us whole.

What if we were to treat ourselves as the sacred vessels that we are, vessels which hold holiness and preciousness? What if we were to look at ourselves with the same excitement with which our youngest members look at our Torah scrolls on a Friday morning? What if we actually were as kind to ourselves as we strive to be to others?

Chazak Chazak- “be strong, be strong and let us be strengthened” are the words we exclaim each time we conclude a reading of a book of Torah, as an acknowledgement of the progress we make, of the new opportunities that open ahead of us. Chazak Chazak Venitchazek- may 5780 be for you and those you care about, a year of growth and new opportunities, a year of comfort, familiarity and new discoveries, and above all a year filled with love and blessings.

The Congregation Albert (CA) Rabbi Search Committee (RSC) was tasked with completing an extensive process to assist the Congregation in selecting its next Rabbi. That process included:

- Signing a covenant through which we each agreed to fulfill the sacred responsibility of finding our next rabbi, carrying out that charge with integrity and fairness, and only recommending to the congregation the candidate whom we support in unity with whole hearts.
- Providing multiple opportunities for members to have input into what they wanted in the next CA rabbi, and listening closely to their responses.
- Developing an application packet that reflected the wishes of the congregation and complied with the requirements of the Central Conference of American Rabbis’ (CCAR) and the Union of Reform Judaism’s (URJ) joint process for the recruitment, selection, and hiring of rabbis.
- Through that process, recruiting, interviewing, communicating with, and organizing and inviting the top candidates for multiple-day visits (conducted virtually due to COVID 19) with the Board of Trustees, the CA RSC Stakeholders’ Advisory Group, the ECC, the confirmation class, clergy, and staff.
- Checking all candidate references.
- Deliberating together on which of the top candidates most fully meets the desires and needs of CA members, both now and in the future, and recommending that person to the CA Board of Trustees (Board) for their approval.
- If approved by the Board of Trustees, presenting the selected candidate to the full CA congregation.

On January 31, 2021, at 1:00 PM we will meet as a congregation on Zoom (due to COVID-19 restrictions) to:
- Respond to your questions regarding CA RSC’s recommendation for our next CA Rabbi,
- Give you an opportunity to meet our recommended Rabbi, and
- Vote on whether to accept the CA RSC’s Rabbi recommendation.

In this booklet we provide you with the same written materials made available to those who attended our recommended candidate’s virtual visit. You may also access those documents, as well as several recorded videos and podcasts featuring our recommended finalist, on our CA website’s “Journey to a New Rabbi” page. For your convenience, you will find direct links to those online resources in this mailing.

The recommendation we put forward to the congregation today is based upon the criteria identified by CA members as the most important experience, knowledge and personal qualities for our next CA rabbi. The Board unanimously accepted the CA RSC’s rabbinic recommendation earlier this month.

So today, after many months of conducting what we know has been a fair and comprehensive process and after careful consideration of our top two candidates - the members of the CA RSC are proud, confident, and unanimous in recommending that the members of the congregation approve Rabbi Celia Surget as our next CA Rabbi.
Rabbi Surget’s resume, interviews, virtual visit and references all reflect her outstanding qualifications as a rabbi. More than that, they confirm that she meets our congregational criteria, demonstrating that she is:

- **A Religious and Spiritual Leader** whose experience and references clearly affirm her reputation as an inspirational, scholarly, devoted, motivational, open-minded and beloved rabbi who superbly performs the full duties of a senior or solo rabbi in her current position, and who has a deep understanding of, and expertise in, the role of music in worship and spiritual life.

- **An Inspiring Educator** who will help us continually improve, expand and innovate our educational programs for both children and adults (including camps, tours and retreats), and keep our youth involved in Jewish education.

- **A Compelling Communicator** who is able to communicate warmly and effectively with people of all ages, interests and backgrounds; who inspires, engages and motivates congregants; and who demonstrates superior listening skills.

- **An Approachable Companion** who is genial and outgoing, and who sees her rabbinic responsibilities including getting to know, listen to, hear, appreciate and understand our members, and to support their efforts to be part of, and to contribute to, our CA community.

- **A Leader in the Jewish Community and the Larger Community** with the proven ability to collaborate with other Jewish clergy, establish contacts and relationships with interfaith congregations, interact appropriately and effectively in important and influential representational roles, and make CA proud to call her our Rabbi.

- **A Catalyst for Change** and a community builder who can lead CA now and into the future by attracting new members (especially young members and families), using electronic technology and other interactive approaches to expand our outreach to a wide range of members and potential members; reinvigorating our youth programs; supporting and promoting all categories of diversity both within our congregation and the larger community; and designing and implementing innovative programs and practices that inspire congregants to join her on her visionary journey.

- **A Role Model and A Mensch** who lives her life in a manner that underscores Jewish values. A Rabbi who is compassionate, intuitive, joyful, creative, accessible, ethical, trustworthy, open-minded, humble, hardworking and dedicated; a Rabbi who goes out of her way to be helpful and supportive, who champions social action and community service in response to Jewish values, who takes a stand on behalf of her congregation members and the Jewish community against bullies and other anti-semitic actors, and who sees and appreciates the innate value in each and every human being.

We strongly encourage you to attend the January 31, 2021, CA all congregational meeting.

We are tremendously grateful for, and proud of, the work of every member of the RSC. We also want to thank every member of Congregation Albert, the Congregation Albert Board, and most especially Board President Dale Atkinson, for your trust in us, and for your support throughout the rabbi search process. We look forward to your action on our recommendation.

Charna Lefton

Joe Weiss

**CA RSC Members:** Joel Berger, Susan Keith, Michael Potok, Andy Schultz, Sarah Winger, and Dale Atkinson (ex-officio)

The scroll that opens ahead of us is an invitation to be expounded and examined, studied and considered, enlightened by all that which has affected us- we cannot leave our worries and troubles behind, much as we might want to, they are part of our stories, but we can use them as we delve into the year ahead.

In the following poem adapted from Father Michel Quoist, Rabbi Allan Malle describes the day to day chaos which can take over our lives, and the risk we run not treating our days and our lives as sacredly as we treat so many other things.

I went out, God

People were coming and going
Walking and running
Everything was rushing: cars, trucks, the street, the whole town.
People were rushing not to waste time.
They were rushing after time,
To catch up with time.
To gain time.
Good-by, Sir, excuse me, I haven’t time.
I’ll come back, I can’t wait, I haven’t time.
I must end this letter I haven’t time.
I’d love to help you, but I haven’t time.
I can’t accept, having no time.
I can’t think, I can’t read, I’m swamped, I haven’t time.
I’d like to pray, but I haven’t time.
You understand God, they simply haven’t the time.
The child is playing, he hasn’t time right now...later on...
The schoolboy has his homework to do, he hasn’t time...Later on...
The young man is at his sports, he hasn’t time...Later on...
The young married man has his house; he has to fix it up. He hasn’t the time...Later on...
They are dying, they gave no...
Too late!...They have no more time!
And so all people run after time, God
They pass through life running-hurried, jostled, overburdened, frantic, and they never get there.
They still haven’t time.
In spite of all their efforts they’re still short of time.
Of a great deal of time.
God, you must have made a mistake in your calculations.
There is a big mistake somewhere.
The hours are too short,
The days are too short,
Our lives are too short.
You who are beyond time, God, you smile to see us fighting it.
And you know what you are doing,
You make no mistakes in your distribution of time to humankind.
You give each one time to do what you want them to do.
But we must not deface time,
(continued on next page)
“Whenever anything then happened in the world, these letters were combined, and the words were recombined to form the account. As soon as an event [that was to be recorded in the Torah] took place, a combination was immediately formed, corresponding to that event. If a different event had taken place, the letters would have combined different. The Torah is God’s wisdom, and it has no end.”

What if on this day of Teshuvah, of introspection, of self-examination, of self-appraisal, we considered the Torah scroll as a metaphor for a year in our life? What if we used today as our own personal Simchat Torah- an opportunity to revisit our lives, our own personal Torah scrolls? What we do tomorrow will not necessarily be drastically different from what we did last year on the day after Yom Kippur, and it might not be drastically different from what we will do next year on the day after Yom Kippur, but it is tomorrow in 5780, not 5779 or 5781, and we could choose to approach tomorrow and the days that follow in the same way that we approach re-reading the text of Tanakh that we find in our Sifre Torah. “Turn it, and turn it again” taught Rabbi ben BagBag in Pirkei Avot. Each year we are invited to delve into the text- the words are familiar, but each year, each reading cycle, we get to discover new interpretations, something else will catch our attention depending on our personal circumstances, depending on the context in which we live or that we are experiencing, be it a political situation affecting society or our personal trials and tribulations. What if we were to treat our lives with the same deference, reverence and honour with which we treat the Sefer Torah? Our lives after all are carefully crafted, and as precious and holy as the object we so carefully protect in the Ark. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

“Moses received Torah” but not all of the Torah “at Sinai.” And not all that was revealed to Moses was conveyed to Israel; the meaning of the commandments is given as an example. Together with the gratitude for the word that was disclosed, there is a yearning for the meaning yet to be disclosed. There is a theory in Jewish literature containing a profound parabolical truth which maintains that the Torah, which is eternal in spirit, assumes different forms in various eons. The Torah was known to Adam when was in the Garden of Eden, although not in its present form. Commandments such as those concerning charity to the poor, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, would have been meaningless in the Garden of Eden.”

“Just as Rome was not built in one day, the Israelites were progressively, and we are still progressively, being explained the text, according to Rabbi Heschel. In the same way, while it would be so much easier to assume that later today, as we hear the final Shofar blast, just like magic, all is forgiven, and we can begin a new cycle, with a clean slate and start fresh, that is not actually the point of Yom Kippur- today we are meant to take stock, carefully consider how we read the scroll of our lives last year, and the year before, consider all of that which we experienced, our successes, our highlights, and what challenged us and consider how we want to revisit the scroll we are about to restart, enriched by the previous year.

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1 Quoted in Ser Ball Shem Tov; 2 God in Search of Man
Education and Social Action (cont.)

- Coordinated activities such as “the Greatest Chametz Bake-Off” to benefit several organizations in the broader community that support those individuals in need of help, shelter or food.
- Developed an outreach program for isolated members of the community, those who were ill or recently bereaved. This achieved not only building a bridge between those members and the community but also brought in new volunteers who were happy to sporadically give up one evening and a little extra time.
- Programming and community development:
  - Developed “Keshet,” the synagogue’s programing committee, and an extensive brochure, to ensure stronger, more vibrant programing and better organized activities.
  - Implement processes and develop structures to support a rapidly growing congregation (approximately 10% each year).
  - Organized and ran an outdoor soup kitchen in coordination with one of the local churches during Sukkot 5776.
  - Visiting Rabbi at Clore Shalom, the local pluralistic day school in the Radlett area.

Administrative and Financial

- Led search for religious school principal, B’nei Mitzvah Coordinator, and youth worker
- Supervised over 70 staff members of diverse ages and skills.
- Safeguarding Lead- ensuring the physical and emotional safety of each person who walks through the doors of our community.
- Manage an annual budget of £100,000

August 2007 – April 2011
Rabbi/Director of Youth, Mouvement Juif Liberal de France
Paris, France

It was an honor fulfill the full range of rabbinic functions in this historical 1000+ family congregation in Paris that is a leading community in Continental Europe, including worship, education, pastoral counselling, social justice, interfait and interfaith work. I worked more specifically with younger members of the community, created and oversaw both formal and informal programming, developed the French branch of Netzer Olami, the Progressive worldwide youth movement, acted as principal of a religious school with over 350 students in our primary school years and over 100 b’nei-mitzvah students, prepared and oversaw budgets, attended meetings of the synagogue board, the executive committee, and relevant committees, and served as a rabbinic mentor to one of the MJLF’s satellite communities.

Worship and Lifecycle

- Oversaw B’nei-Mitzvah Programme for over 100 students a year.
- Created family and tot services for Shabbat and festivals, including High Holy Days.
- Developed Shabbat Zimra - an innovative Erev Shabbat service that included musicians and original music, which attracted over 250 people on a monthly basis and was a first of its kind in France.
- Created a structure that enabled more of our members to feel confident and empowered to lead services, including festivals and High Holy Days.

Writing Sample #2:

Yom Kippur Shacharit- 5780 (Radlett)

Torah scrolls are just like people-they come in all shapes and sizes. There are tall scrolls, and small scrolls, scrolls that are heavier and scrolls that are lighter; scrolls from which we can read easily, and scrolls whose ink has faded a bit, or whose writing is less clear. And all share a common denominator: they were crafted with love and the utmost care and reverence.

One of the highlights of my week is the Kabbalat Shabbat service we hold every Friday morning for the youngest members of our community and those who care for them. What a privilege it is so see them race up on the bimah, gather around the ark, possibly shave each other out of the way as they reach for the handles on the Ark, try to get those doors open so we can wish each of our Torah scrolls “Shabbat Shalom”! There is always that wonderful, somewhat magical moment when a child has grown enough so that they can finally reach the door handle to the ark, and you can see the satisfaction in their eyes, even if they are standing on the highest point of their tiny toes. And then we have the friendly argument over which scroll we should wish Shabbat Shalom to first- the big one, the little one, the red one, the blue one or the other red one. Every week, through their eyes, I am reminded of the central place that a Torah scroll holds in our tradition, and the honour that has been bestowed on our community and that we have been blessed with the responsibility of looking after five of them.

A Torah scroll is not merely an object that we read from on Shabbat morning or on festivals- it has a story, it holds our heritage, its creation is nothing short of awe inspiring, and the kavod, the honour we give it reflects both its emotional value and its financial investment. We flinch when we see a scroll being handled with less care then we are comfortable with and we gasp and tremble when we think a scroll might inadvertently take a tumble. And while not everyone might be up to scratch on the laws of kashrut, many of us, dare I say most of us, have heard that if we witness a scroll falling, we are expected to fast for forty days (sunrise to sunset, not a full Yom Kippur fast). Year after year at Simchat Torah we celebrate the conclusion of the reading of the scroll in a joyous fashion and rejoice in beginning anew a text that we know and that we look forward to visiting with again, to studying, to engaging with, like an old friend or a much loved book.

Rabbi Yehoshua Avraham of Zitmar taught the following;

“Our sages teach us that the Torah was created two thousand years ago. This is difficult to understand, since the Torah contains the accounts of many events that happened after creation. How then can the Torah speak of creation, Adam and Eve, Noah, the holy Patriarchs, and all the other happenings recorded in the Torah? All these things had not yet happened. Actually, when the Torah was first created, it was a mixture of letters; the letters of the Torah were not yet combined into words as they are now.”
In light of that reading, yes, the situation would seem rather dire for the European Jewish community, and you might be tempted to consider that it is time to pack your bags and move to countries deemed “safer” for the Jews. And yet, there is another way to consider these events, through glass that is half-full. This is not about glossing over what has happened, or attempting to minimize them. Incidents with a varied range of consequences happened, it is a reality. Yet, all is not dire, and while so much has been reported about the various incidents, little has been said of the responses, in fact they have barely been acknowledged, and that is why I see the glass to be half-full.

Government leaders, company directors, community leaders have clearly protested against anti-Semitic acts, and even at time taken legal measures to ensure that it was understood that there are clear boundaries where the law is concerned and that there is such a thing as being outside of that law if an individual engages in certain behaviours that can be considered as anti-Semitic. I am also comforted that a distinction finally seems to have been made between being Jewish and being Israeli, and there seems to be an awareness, a realization that a Jew can be English or French, and that we are subject to the same laws and rules as our fellow countrymen. And this means that we are seen to be whole and complete members of society, who bring to the mix another culture, just as so many other members of society do.

Celebrating our heritage as European Jews and proudly embracing our identity is not about standing up to those who would prefer not to have us as neighbours, but it is simply about celebrating a rich and beautiful culture and religion, that has survived through so much and that we should hold preciously in our hands. Some of you will know the following moment I am about to mention, but it was truly so powerful, and meaningful, so beautiful that it is worth sharing again:

As part of the Yom Hashoah commemoration in France, the names of the 76000 Jews who were deported from France are read over a 24 hour long period (and over a cycle of three years). In the middle of the night, when there is just over a minyan of people present, an elderly gentleman, who came up with 3 other people interrupted the list of names I was reading and read some of the names himself, the names of his parents, of his family. And then he read his own name, and proudly pointed to his son, grandson and great-grandson who stood next to him and stated categorically: “I came back”. And I realized that if he could stay, build a home, build a future, celebrate his heritage, then I so should I.

“The only thing to fear is fear itself” said Franklin D Roosevelt. Let us not be our own worst enemies and let the ignorance and aggressivity of others prevent us from building stronger relationships with our communities, embracing even more fully our Judaism. Let us keep on learning, and growing, going from strength to strength, and always remain active and committed members of society, standing on shoulders of giants and preparing to hoist in turn on our shoulders, the next generation of European Jewry.
Since September 2012  Rabbinic Tutor at the Leo Baeck College   London, UK
- Mentor rabbinic students
- Advise rabbinic students on career opportunities and support them through rabbinic training, as well as the first years of their careers Since 2011 EUPIJ (European Union for Progressive Judaism) London, UK
- Founding member and treasurer of ERA, the European Progressive Rabbinic Association
- Member of the organizing committee of EUPIJ rabbinic kallot in 2014 and 2016 April 2010 EUPIJ Conference Paris, France
- Helped organize the conference that brought together 250 Progressive Jews from Europe
- Member of the Programming committee September 2001-May 2002 Junior Youth group advisor, Central Synagogue New York, New York
- Developed programs and ran activities for three Junior Youth groups (3rd-8th grades)
- Assisted the Senior Youth group advisor

Summers 2001 and 2002  Head Resident Advisor, URJ Kutz Camp  Warwick, New York
- Managed and trained a team of twenty counselors
- Oversaw the wellbeing of 200-250 program participants

EDUCATION
2003-2007  Leo Baeck College – Center for Jewish Education  London, UK
- Rabbinical ordination 2007
2000-2002  Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion  New York, USA
- Rabbinical program
- Jerusalem, Israel
1997-2000  University of Geneva  Geneva, Switzerland
- Demi-License (BA equivalent) in History of Religions, Classical Hebrew and Philosophy

COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES AND AFFILIATION
- Central Conference of American Rabbis, member since 2009
- Volunteered with the Restos du Coeur, a French organization that supports homeless, vulnerably housed and lonely individuals by providing them with warm meals, support and helping them find shelter (2006-2011).

My Judaism, our Judaism is something we should be celebrating everyday- we are surrounded by so much history, we stand on the shoulders of incredible giants, and every day we honour, recognize and acknowledge a little bit more our heritage. Has it always been easy? Certainly not, and it may have felt a little harder over the summer and in the past few months. And while grappling with how to address the question, I came across the following story:

When the Seer of Lublin died, he left very few possessions to his children. One item was a clock. His son took it, and once on a journey when he could not pay for his lodging, he gave the clock to the innkeeper. Some years later, a young rabbi was staying at that same inn. He arrived late and the inn was full. But the owner had compassion and allowed him to spend the night in the master bedroom. All night long, the innkeeper heard dancing from the room where the tired rabbi was staying.

In the morning, the innkeeper asked the rabbi what he had been doing all night. “It was the clock!” exclaimed the rabbi. “When I heard the ticking, I knew it belonged to my teacher, the Seer of Lublin! All other clocks, when people hear them ticking and tocking, they are simply counting down the moments to death. But the clock of the Holy Seer was different. He used it to count down the time to the next mitzvah. ‘When can I say the morning Sh’mi?’ And he used it count how much closer he was coming to his goal of serving God with all his heart.”

I realize that this Chasidic tale can be summarized in just a few words- it is the ever present dilemma of the glass that is half-full or half-empty. And as we look back to the recent events whether in Europe, including the UK or in Israel, we can choose between two ways of considering the events.

As we enter into the new year, we take the time to review the past year, to revisit our lives and take our actions into account, and as we reflect on the time that has past, on the days, on the hours and the minutes we might ask ourselves “did I live up to the expectation of living a chayiim tovim”- if yes how and if not why. And on a larger scale, we also reflect on all that happened in our communities and to our communities. We might feel angst and fear, or anger and disappointment. Some might agree with the front page of the Jewish News.

Last week, in its final edition of 5774, the Jewish News decided offer a recap of the year with a rather dramatic front page- Annus Horribilis is how they referred to this past year. The title, along with the pictures the editors chose to illustrate their front page, included snapshots of some the terrible events that happened to the Jewish community. I guess, this was their perception of 5774. If you still had the courage to open the newspaper, and turn to page 18, where the article continued on a small column in fairly small print, there was an attempt to cheer the reader up with some of the good things that also happened.
Rosh Hashanah 5775

(Radlett: Petit Beurre biscuits were distributed to the congregation that day)

In Nantes, in 1886, Louis Lefevre Utile, one of the sons of the founders of the company LU (for Lefevre Utile), imagined a biscuit which could be eaten every day, that would not be a special treat or a delicacy, but was simply a common item. And to mark, to celebrate perhaps that particular trait, he decided to design a biscuit that would be a representation of time- a way to acknowledge that common nature of the item. Even the biscuit name reflects just how basic it is- a Petit Beurre, a “Little Butter”, which I realize sounds like a very odd name, and I can assure you that when you say it in French and actually think about it, it is just as odd. But the name has become part of the French language and is used to generically designate any kind of biscuit of that type: simple, not much taste, basic.

Here is how Louis Lefevre Utile chose to represent time in his biscuit:

- The 52 teeth around the biscuit stand for the number of weeks in a year
- The four corners symbolise the four seasons
- The biscuit is 7 cm long for the seven days of the week
- The 24 little dots are meant to remind us of the 24 hours in a day

The Petit Beurre is a classic in the French confectionary world. It has been developed to the extent that it now comes with chocolate chips, because really everything tastes better with chocolate, and has even become the base for another classic biscuit- the Petit Ecolier, the “little school child” (I don’t make up these names). Such is its presence in French culture that the Consistoire Central, the official French (orthodox) religious authority, has ruled that it is kosher and therefore is listed in the official “foods you can eat” handbook. And the Petit Beurre is so popular that some Israeli companies and kosher companies have attempted to make their own copy versions, which do not always answer to the same strict standards of design. For those of you wondering- yes, I did spend some time in a kosher supermarket measuring and counting, and tasting- though obviously only after having purchased a packet. My suggestion- the original is bland, yes, but tastier than its copies, it is considered kosher, and really, if you want to eat a Petit Beurre, eat the original.

Another perhaps less obvious, and surely more interesting trait of the Petit Beurre, and the reason I chose to speak of it this morning, is the metaphor it stands for: in so many ways, the biscuit is like the Jews of Europe. The biscuit is inextricably linked to the French confectionary tradition. It is difficult to imagine a world where it would not exist; such is its impact and presence.

European Jews are the same. Living as a Jew of the Diaspora is not about living in a country as a Jew waiting for the opportunity to make Aliyah. There is a very strong, very vibrant beautiful tradition of Judaism outside of Israel.
In his book *I’m God, You’re Not*, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner retells a story Martin Buber told of the Baal Shem Tov:

Once a man saw a beautiful bird high atop a tree. No one else saw it. A great longing came over him to reach the bird see it up close. But the tree was too high and there was no ladder. So he devised a plan. He persuaded people who stood there with him to form a pyramid to whose top he could climb and reach the bird. Those who helped knew nothing of the bird; they never even saw it. But the man who did see it could never have been able to reach the bird without them. Indeed had any of them left his or her place, then everyone would have fallen to the earth.

Rabbi Kushner understands this story as a parable for congregational life: a congregation is a “human pyramid. Its goal is to raise more and more of its members high enough to reach the bird’s nest.”

We often place too great an importance on the goal. Yes, to have an objective and to strive for it is important. Without these, we would not learn, we would not appreciate the developments we witness on a daily basis, and we certainly would not perceive and appreciate how much we grow as individuals.

But we cannot limit the point of the story to the teaching that, as a congregation, goals are important. We do not give the Baal Shem Tov sufficient credit for the more discreet, yet even more important lesson that he gives us.

The process in which we engage, the journey we take to achieve our set objectives, deserve even more focus, for that is what builds us, and makes us stronger, better people and more empowered Jews.

The pyramid is the core of the story: why we build it and what we achieve when we have built it is not nearly as important as simply building it. In order for it to be strong, thought needs to have gone into its architecture: who are the people best suited to support the base, who are those who will be most useful on top? Is anyone feeling hurt or disgruntled by their assignment, is each individual feeling respected and included, and not simply used for what others perceive they can offer?

Only when these questions are answered can the pyramid be successfully built, in a collegial and trusting atmosphere. It is not an easy process, arguing may well ensue, and part of the challenge lies in the manner in which these potential disagreements might be resolved. That being said, each member of the pyramid also needs to be conscious of their own limitations and be prepared to take on a different role than the one originally anticipated; and this means that others will have to roll up their sleeves and step up to the plate.

The pyramid is metaphor for my understanding of a strong, healthy and vibrant congregation.

I have been fortunate to be involved with two large communities, in Paris and greater London, that strived to involve as many individuals as possible in community life; the leadership did not lie with one small group and the programming did not depend on the goodwill of a few. As a rabbi serving communities that embrace that model, it is my responsibility to get to know as many of our members as possible, to listen to them, to hear, appreciate and understand what they are asking for, and support them in their efforts to contribute.

For each of the communities, the challenge was different: in Paris, I was tasked with helping a community engage in a process of healing and recovery, and we indeed went from strength to strength, rebuilding the trust that had been broken, engaging and inviting in new members to the point where we found ourselves struggling to fit everyone in at the close of Yom Kippur.

The congregation I currently serve in the UK faces a different struggle- we are growing, too fast some might say, and some of our longstanding members struggle with the changes that growth brings. In both situations, as different as they are, I see that being able to apply the model of the pyramid made, and makes, the difference.

Using the tools of my profession, I engage in this form of outreach every day: services, lifecycle events, classes, attempting to call each of our members before the High Holy Days, handwritten thank-you notes, even encounters in the supermarket become a shared experience upon which I can build and/or strengthen a relationship with a particular congregant.

There is one reality about the pyramid described by the Baal Shem Tov which is hard to ignore, especially in these times: the pyramid is built outside, is exposed to the elements and is therefore fragile and vulnerable. As my community in London faced the challenges presented by the pandemic, I realized that despite the fear, the sadness, the anxieties, the anger, the frustrations my congregants and myself are experiencing, our vision has not changed and my role as rabbi has remained the same. My personal challenge has been to learn how to lead and accompany my congregation as we adapt our pyramid, as we strive to achieve our vision. Our vision has not changed and my role as rabbi has remained the same. My personal challenge has been to learn how to lead and accompany my congregation as we adapt our pyramid, as we strive to achieve our vision.

I miss in-person interactions with congregants; these special, sacred moments are what I most appreciate about the role I am privileged to hold. While it is hard at the moment to have a clear understanding of what lies ahead, I know that I will carry with me the lessons I have learned from being a rabbi during this pandemic, and look forward to drawing upon these experiences to strengthen my rabbinate.

One of my favorite Hebrew words is kadosh, because of its meaning- while it is usually translated as “holy” or “sacred”, it first means “distinct”, “separate” or “unique”. Building a pyramid, growing a community is kadosh: it is an act that brings together a group of people with a shared purpose and a shared vision that only they can experience in a unique way. And as a rabbi, it is my privilege to be a part of that journey, of that sacred act.