

# UNITED SYNAGOGUE CHESED

Michelle Minsky

These extracts from Cecil Roth's *History of the Jews of England*, published in 1941, remind us of King Solomon's words that 'there is nothing new under the sun.'

"The problems that exercised the community during Solomon Hirschell's Rabbinate (1802-1842) were much the same as those of today - education, poor relief, Sabbath observance, synagogal decorum, the arrangements for the Kosher meat supply, and so on. Charitable organisation and the condition of the Jewish poor were the first matters to demand attention. From the close of the eighteenth century, a number of fresh institutions, conceived and regulated on English lines, began to make their appearance among the Ashkenazi community; and in their creation members of The Great Synagogue played an outstanding part. In 1778, there was established the Bread, Meat and Coal Charity - the first Ashkenazi institution of the sort. Further institutions of this type were established in rapid succession - a Society for assisting the poor for their Sabbath Necessities (later known from the amount of the largess made available as the Five Shilling Sabbath Charity: 1798-1803, a Holy Land Relief Fund (1805), a Ladies' Benevolent Institution (1812), a Society for Clothing Poor Jewish Boys (1813), the Institution for the Relief of the Indigent Blind of the Jewish Persuasion (1819) and so on. In the winter of 1799/1800, Benjamin Goldsmid, supported by members of both sections of the community (i.e. Ashkenasi and Sephardi) took the chair at a meeting held to establish a Soup Kitchen".

All of this had been given added urgency by the impact of the French Revolution on everything from wheat processing for Matzah to an understanding that the poor needed educating so they could get jobs. So, in 1793 JFS went from only teaching Hebrew to having English and maths on the curriculum.

"An allied problem was that of Passover flour, for which all the London congregations originally made their own arrangements. This proved ruinously wasteful, in view of the great quantities of Matzoth that had to be distributed to the poor. In December 1794, when the war with France had sent up prices to an unprecedented level, the four communities decided that henceforth they would have all the wheat ground at the same mill under joint supervision, thus considerably reducing overhead costs. (That year, in view of the high prices, two-thirds only of the customary free allowance was distributed, the remainder being replaced by potatoes.) In the end, the Great Synagogue assumed the duty of supplying all the flour for Matzoth for the Ashkenazim, purchasing the wheat and defraying the cost of the milling and the religious supervision. Later on, the problem of joint distribution to those who could not afford to pay was also taken in hand".

The community leaders of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century understood the importance of educating the young and feeding the poor. In each generation, Anglo-Jewry has sought to pick up those themes in a contemporary manner. When our own Jeremy Jacobs was CEO of the US, he launched the contemporary initiative. Jeremy writes of the creation of the Living and Learning department of the US:

'Jewish education takes place in a number of settings including the home, the synagogue, and in school. During my tenure as Chief Executive of the United Synagogue it became clear that the organisation, whilst focusing on Jewish education at schools had not allocated sufficient resources or thought to Jewish education elsewhere. It was with this in mind that alongside the development of Tribe a special focus was needed on Jewish living, learning and caring both within the home and in Shul by creating and funding specialist educational and social care programmes. Thus Jewish Visitation became a core part of United Synagogue provision to the community.'

Michelle Minsky, as the head of US Chesed gives us a picture of the work undertaken today: Chesed is the Hebrew word for kindness. Our aim in the Chesed Department is to help our own members and the wider community in which we live. We have deliberately used the phrase "wider community" as it encompasses both the Jewish and the non-Jewish world, local, national and international. We wish both to support people if they are having a hard time, but also to provide opportunities for volunteering in social responsibility projects.

US Chesed provides guidance and training for the local shul community or welfare groups, together with advice on complex cases. It is these groups, such as our own excellent Belmont Community Cares, who provide the day to day services such as befriending, driving members to hospital appointments, keeping in touch with those who are unwell, isolated, bereaved or elderly, cooking for people in times of need as well as arranging social events to keep us all connected (COVID-permitting).

Working together with the local communities, we have always tried to offer that extra support at key times in the Jewish Calendar, which we know can be very challenging. This can include cards and honey cakes at Rosh Hashanah, Mishloach Manot at Purim and particularly relevant for this time of year, food parcels or vouchers for those who are unable to afford the costs of Pesach. We want all our members to have the opportunity to celebrate a kosher Pesach, regardless of their financial situation.

Since the start of COVID 19, what was once a Pesach food parcel scheme has now become our weekly essential parcel scheme with non-perishables, fresh food, cooked meals, toiletries and household goods provided. This is for people who either cannot afford the costs of these items or who are physically unable to shop for themselves. Clearly, with the increases in the cost of living, the number of people needing to use this service may well increase.

Jewish Visitation – or 'Jewish Visiting' as we now call it – includes both hospital and prison chaplaincy. US Chesed endorses Jewish Chaplains as suitable and appropriate to carry out their role. This is on behalf of the Jewish community generally, not just US members and chaplains come from across the Jewish spectrum. If you know someone who is either in hospital or prison and who would like a visit from a Jewish chaplain, please do get in touch with us and we can make sure that the relevant Jewish chaplain is notified. In Belmont we have two Jewish Chaplains – Anthony Kaiser who has recently been appointed as the chaplain at Northwick Park Hospital and Jeremy Jacobs who has been a prison chaplain for many years and covers several different prisons.

For a number of years, we have also initiated projects supporting the wider community – this includes collections of various items such as food, clothing, toys and toiletries for vulnerable groups such as people affected by domestic abuse, the homeless and asylum-seekers. The US runs two drop-in centres for asylum-seekers, one in Woodford Forest and the other in Hendon and although these have been affected by COVID, we have maintained contact with these clients throughout that time. Once again Belmont members have been very involved with these centres in a number of different roles. With the terrible situation in Ukraine, our current advice is that the best thing we can do is to make a donation to World Jewish Relief, who have a long-standing involvement there and are currently working on the ground in the area. Further updates on how we can help will be provided.

Lastly, we also provide bursaries for families who otherwise would not be able to send their children on Tribe events such as Israel Tour and Summer Camp, as well as some of the day outings.

The Chesed Helpline is open Monday - Thursday from 9.00 - 5.00 and on Fridays from 9.00 - 1.00. Outside those hours, please leave a message and we will get back to you. Please do telephone us on 020 8343 5696 if you need practical, spiritual or emotional support.

Finally, readers of Belmont's weekly newsletter will have seen that we are running a charity appeal over the 27/28 March to raise much-needed money for US Chesed to ensure that we can continue to run these vital services. Please do donate if you can.