

RABBI
RAYMOND APPLE

History and the chanukiyyah

THERE are many keys to Jewish history.

Our books, our prayers, our songs, our food – certainly our chanukiyyot. You discover where Jews have been by looking at their Chanukah lights.

You find a Moroccan chanukiyyah in the shape of an Andalusian mosque and European chanukiyyot in the shape of Gothic cathedrals. You get the political picture when you see chanukiyyot bearing the seals, coats of arms, cyphers and flags of an array of rulers and regimes.

You find musical menorot that play “God Save the Queen” and other national anthems, not to forget menorot that play the Hatikvah.

Architectural styles and artistic symbols reflect the milieu where Jews have lived. And of course there are Jewish motifs such as Biblical heroes, palm trees, lions of Judah, the Ten Commandments, the twin columns that stood outside the entrance to the Jerusalem Temple, the crown of the Torah, even the synagogue Ark.



A London silversmith of 1712 created a menorah that shows the prophet Elijah explaining to an Israelite woman how to fill her vessels with oil.

After the First World War someone designed a menorah in which the candle-holders were spent bullet cases. Earlier, 18th century menorot were made from the metal hats of soldiers who fought in the Seven Years’ War, and some bore military insignia. Not that European countries allowed professing Jews to serve as soldiers, though there were Jewish traders who supplied the wants of the troops.

In Britain it was not until the late 1880s that professing Jews could officially enlist in the army, which basically removed the final restriction on Jews in public life.

The defiant symbol of the yeshivah in Sderot, the town under fire at the Gaza border, is a menorah fashioned out of spent rocket cases.



Sderot, menorah fashioned out of spent rocket cases, 2015.

COMMUNITIES, LEADERS AND YOUTH

Progressive Judaism invests in growth

PETER KOHN

ESTABLISHING new congregations, finding rabbinic and lay leaders for these, and attracting Jewish youth are the three goals outlined by Rabbi Danny Freeland, president of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), when he visited Australia recently.

Rabbi Freeland was a special guest of the Union for Progressive Judaism biennial conference, held from November 15-18, which saw more than 210 rabbis, cantors, administrators and volunteers from among 27 Asia-Pacific congregations, schools and youth groups converge on Melbourne to chart the future of the movement in Australia, New Zealand and the Asia-Pacific region.

On the eve of the conference, the Jerusalem-based rabbi sat down with *The AJN* to outline his movement’s global and regional vision.

“We try to create new congregations wherever Jews seem to be moving. We work from the theory that Jews always move, sometimes because of antisemitism, sometimes out of economic opportunity. The World Union created communities in the 1930s in Melbourne and Sydney, as well as in Johannesburg and Sao Paolo, during the rise of Nazism.

“But we’re now working to create opportunities just like in the 1990s when we created new congregations in the former Soviet Union. Right now we’re working to create Jewish communities in Asia, in Spain, Portugal, parts of Italy, where there haven’t been Progressive Jewish communities or any Jewish communities at all,” he noted.

Rabbi Freeland described Israel, with its 50 Progressive synagogues, five more than last year, “as one of the World Union’s success stories”.



Rabbi Danny Freeland (left) and David Bernstein.

Photo: Peter Kohn

As to finding leaders for Diaspora communities, one of the priorities is to maintain a flow of rabbis, especially into the smaller communities, he explained. But language and culture barriers are an important issue. “You can’t take an American-trained rabbi and drop that person into a Spanish or Russian speaking country, so our work in the last few years has been to create rabbinical training programs, such as at our seminary in Moscow.”

Thirteen per cent of secular Israelis “identify as Reform Jews and have encountered us at life cycle events and on chagim.”

With regard to the next generation, Rabbi Freeland sees the challenge as “how do we get young people to turn on to creating their own Progressive Judaism, not just what they inherit from their parents”, and he sees youth movements such as Australia’s Netzer as the key.

The rabbi is enthusiastic about a new Find A Community app that lets users connect with a wide array

of Progressive Jewish communities around the globe, which is particularly useful when they travel.

“Israel and North America are the big centres, but there are two to three million Jews living outside of these centres,” he reflected, “and Judaism, particularly Progressive Judaism, is the nexus between the local culture and Jewish tradition.”

Another high-profile visitor to the conference was David Bernstein, a senior executive of the Israel Movement for Progressive

Judaism (IMPJ), who sat with *The AJN* to explain new developments.

The latest survey by the Jewish People Policy Institute showed that 13 per cent of secular Israelis “identify as Reform Jews and have encountered us at life cycle events and on chagim”, he said, and the IMPJ has set a critical-mass target of some 800,000 members for its Israeli communities.

Bernstein sees grassroots growth and the opening of new communities and populating their membership as the driving force of non-Orthodox Judaism in Israel. Growth on the ground is critical, he said, even as the IMPJ’s advocacy arm, the Israel Reform Action Centre, continues representing the movement on public policy and legal issues in the Supreme Court and Knesset.

He sees incidents such as the detention this year of Masorti’s Rabbi Dov Haiyoun for conducting a non-Orthodox Jewish wedding ceremony, which are outlawed in Israel, as a direct result of the growing success of non-Orthodox Judaism in Israel.

“Because of the success we’re having on a grassroots municipal level, the rhetoric against us and sometimes the activity against us on a national level by the Chief Rabbinate, by the charedi political parties, by some of the extreme people in some of the other political parties, is becoming more heightened.

“I think they feel threatened, because every time we have a congregation on a local level that succeeds, the ultra-Orthodox population at that local level tells their politicians, ‘Look these guys are succeeding here’. We’re seeing heightened rhetoric against us, we’re seeing language used against us that’s worse than we’ve ever heard before by politicians.”

And Bernstein made the point that Israeli Progressive Judaism is now an authentic expression of Israeli culture, not, as some of its Orthodox critics claim, an American transplant. The term he uses is “Israelisation” -- in fact, some of the Israeli synagogue music developed in recent years, by cantors and composers such as Boaz Dorot, is becoming popular at Diaspora synagogues. He sees this as a sure sign that Israeli Progressive Judaism has come of age.

THE PARASHA: מקץ

Redefining aspects of our past

“Don’t judge yourself by your past – you don’t live there anymore”.

AS Jews we must live with the past but not in the past. We are not defined by our mistakes. We are not chained by our negative experiences.

If there was ever a Jewish leader who embodied this theme not only as a philosophy in life but as a way of life, it was the central character of this week’s Torah portion, Joseph.

Joseph lived with this belief every day of his existence. Orphaned at nine, kidnapped at seventeen, falsely accused of rape and wrongfully incarcerated, Joseph had every justification to be angry at the world. But he wasn’t. He redefined his past and



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found within himself an unparalleled resilience. He grew from his negative experiences, rose to unprecedented power, earned the trust and respect of all who knew him and helped millions of people along the way.

Indeed, this week’s portion, Miketz, affords us a glimpse into the gift psychologists refers to as “cognitive reframing” — the ability to reframe our negative past experiences into transformative lessons whose sole purpose is to make us better and stronger people.

Although we cannot change

our past, we can choose to redefine it. Some of the greatest Jewish leaders in history emerged from the darkness of a bitter youth or a broken childhood. They went on to build nations, inspire the masses and empower the weak and vulnerable.

Judaism teaches us that just as Joseph transformed his life in this week’s portion, we all have the ability to move forward in our lives in a positive and meaningful way. We are afforded the opportunity of Teshuvah – returning to God and to our core. We are equipped with the ability to break away from our past and map out our future according to our own terms and inspired by the timeless teachings of our faith and our Torah.

That is not to say this goal is

easily achieved. To be sure, many have tried and failed. But failure is not an indication that it’s time to quit – it’s a life experience which fosters growth, resilience and determination to continue trying until we finally get there.

The Kotzker Rebbe famously said: “When you see two people on a ladder, one on the bottom rung and the other on the top, don’t judge them until you see which direction they’re going”. It’s not about the destination but the journey along the way. Joseph understood this and became an inspiration to all. Let us all aspire to emulate Joseph as best we possibly can.

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