



Kenton United Synagogue London Shabbat 2 March 2024 – Review

Kenton United Synagogue invited a guest choir and two guest cantors for their ECA 'From Our Lips ...' service Celebrating Synagogue Music on 2 March. In its heyday in the 1970s there had been an excellent community choir at Kenton, as there also was at nearby synagogues in Belmont and Wembley. Belmont still has a choir. Wembley community has shrunk so much that they sold their synagogue building and pray in a house nearby. The Kenton community which though much smaller and older than before, is nevertheless still dynamic. Rabbi Yehuda Black, who has been at Kenton for 20 years, and the committee, stimulate activities for its 300 keen members almost every day of the week from gardening to singing and dancing.



The Guest Cantors – Robert Brody and Geoffrey Shisler

Kenton is most fortunate to have as a member, **Robert Brody**, the esteemed singer who has been a London favourite as a cantorial soloist at many synagogues as well as chief soloist for many Jewish choirs. Robert is regularly called upon the daven at Kenton, and I wonder if the community realises what a special gift they have. Robert is not only a superb interpreter of the prayers, but even after a long career as a soloist is in very fine mellifluous tenor voice. He is a true musician.

When Robert ascended the Bimah to start the Shacharit Service, his voice soared into the space and brought everyone to a sense of connection with the text of the prayers. With the backing of the choir to harmonise and create volume, leading the congregation in song, brought back many happy memories of the days when Kenton shul was full.





The community also welcomed back to Kenton **Geoffrey Shisler, Chazan, Rabbi, Teacher and Magician**. Geoffrey, who led the Musaf Service, had been the energetic and popular Cantor at Kenton for 20 years in its heyday, from 1973 to 1993. He and his wife Anne are remembered with great fondness by the Kenton Community. They made a very considerable contribution to its development throughout its growth and prime years when there were 600 children in the cheder and more than 1000 families as members. To hear his voice in the shul again was a real pleasure.

Geoffrey is also a dedicated teacher, passionate about nusach and the art of Jewish prayer (which he taught that at Jews College for many years). After serving Kenton Geoffrey moved on to Bournemouth, as the Rabbi, and then ended his distinguished career from 2000 to 2014 as Rabbi of the New West End Synagogue, St Petersburg Place.

Those Kenton children have now moved on to other places, leaving their parents behind at Kenton. There are still plenty of Simchas celebrated – but they are not Bnei Mitzvot or even weddings – but more likely to be golden wedding celebrations. In fact, the Kiddush on the occasion was held in honour of the 62nd wedding anniversary of members whom Geoffrey and Anne surely remember.

The Layout of the shul

Kenton shul has a very cleverly designed interior. Behind the Aron Kodesh (left in the pictures above) is a grid of beautiful stained-glass windows. Panning out (in the picture above right) we see pews on either side beyond the arches, making a compact shul area that can be shielded off, leaving a vast multi-purpose shul/hall with a gallery along one side and across the back.

On the day of the 'From Our Lips ...' service, the spacious Bimah (reading desk) was in place in the centre of the hall. Instead of banks of seats on either side, as you see in the picture, there were three rows of four white topped tables spaced out on each side, each table had one or two chairs behind it. When I arrived just after 9.30am, I was the only woman present. There were about twenty men downstairs – nine of whom were the guest choir who took up a position near the bimah on the right-hand side (looking at the picture) in two rows, each row behind two tables that were pushed together.

By the end of the torah reading part of service (it was an exceptionally long Sedra) the numbers had risen to 45 men downstairs in the pews and at the tables and 35 women upstairs in the gallery in rows. It was said that this was slightly more than usual. The 'tables' arrangement proved to very comfortable. As the Prayerbooks (the Jonathan Sacks version of the Singers Siddur) and Chumashim have become ever larger and heavier, having a large flat surface to put them on, together with a tallis bag, a glass of water and any other paraphernalia was most convenient. The large space seemed comfortably occupied. The men were able to stand up and sit down at required times with ease - and also walk around.

There was a warm atmosphere in the service. It was nice to see the Warden (Leigh Lewis) with flowing white hair and beard and large tallis flouncing up and down between the tables with his

card index, fixing the aliyot for the day. (They don't have regular wardens but choose individual members to serve each week.) The Leyening from the Torah was excellently done by member, Stuart Leigh, and the Haftara read by another member, Cyril Brazil.

The Guest Choir

The community had invited David Druce, who is the Chairman and past conductor of the London Cantorial Singers, and was also the Wembley Synagogue Choir Master, to source some singers specially for the 'From Our Lips ...' Shabbat service. The group that he assembled was a wonderful combination of members of Kenton and Belmont synagogue as well as the Shabbaton Choir, the London Jewish Male Choir and the London Cantorial Singers. They were all steeped in the London orthodox repertoire and needed little rehearsal to provide a wonderful rich sound and ruach in the building, which has an excellent acoustics.

What they sang:

Between the Choir and Guest cantors we were treated to rich renderings in the Torah service of music by Sulzer and Lewandowski. **Ana Avda** and **Eitz Chayim** were composed by Geoffrey Shisler himself. Together with the choir and congregation they sang Sol Zim's **Avinu Shebashamayim**. **Ashrei** was a setting by Sulzer and Mendelssohn; **Hodo al Eretz, Hovu** by Mombach. For **Ein Keloheinu**, Geoffrey chose a well-known traditional tune that the congregation knew well and sang with great enthusiasm, as they also did for Stephen Glass's arrangement of the "San Francisco" tune for **Adon Olam**.

Impassioned speeches

Rabbi Yehuda Black gave a short but impassioned talk about his visit to New York last weekend to Chabad Headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn where 3000 children had gathered for a service and then all moved to Times Square, proclaiming their pride in being Jewish. And he was concerned at the world's double standards not noticing the worst atrocity to Jews since the Holocaust – or the abuses of human rights in Syria, Somalia or China, but accusing Jews of 'genocide'.

At the end of the service Rabbi Geoffrey Shisler gave an equally impassioned speech about how the UK is losing its Jewish heritage in prayer music. He said there was a time 50 or 60 years ago when if a chazan put a note wrong for the time of day or Festival or Shabbat service – the Gabbai would correct him, and the congregation would be agitated by his lack of proper nusach. He bemoaned that fact that today the Gabbai would not notice, and neither would the congregation. Not even the Rabbi may be aware of what was in olden times the correct nusach for the occasion – nor he thought, would they even care. This does beg the question as to how important this is at the moment and if there may be other considerations in prayer music that may have more pertinence for current congregations. Geoffrey also lamented that nowadays one often hears melodies from current musical theatre, or operas adapted to the prayers. He does recognise though that tunes by Handel and Mendelssohn have been accepted into the repertoire. It surely follows then that a community might legitimately feel drawn to the prayers sung to well known tunes by the world's outstanding composers. Geoffrey certainly accepts that new tunes are

permissible, as he himself has published two acclaimed books of music that he has written for Jewish prayer.

The purpose of the ‘From Our Lips ...’ Celebrating Synagogue Music Festival (and also of the widespread research project that will follow) is to find out what is moving congregations in prayer in the 2020s. Jewish communities are thriving, maybe not the same ones as years ago. ECA recognises that things move on *le-dor vador* – from generation to generation and that the music that moves one generation in prayer will not be the same as previous ones. Another purpose of celebrating synagogue music, is to encourage synagogues to think about what they are presenting to their communities in terms of quality and style of music for prayer. We are so happy to be celebrating so much variety (and also so much similarity) in the music of many different communities. And it is good to hear each synagogue thinking about where they are going next on this journey.



After the service – which the guest cantors were fearful was going on a bit too long, so they left out **Yismechu** which they had planned to sing to a traditional melody arranged by Stephen Glass. It ended at about 12.40 after which there was a generous Kiddush for all.

Then, Robert and Linda Brody, who were hosting Geoffrey and Anne Shisler for the weekend, invited the

choir members and their wives and also Ronnie and me, to their home for a delicious lunch accompanied by lusty zmirot and benching.

At the end of an eventful and enjoyable shabbat, Robert and Geoffrey recited Havdalah together. Many thanks to all concerned for a lovely musical and warm Shabbat.

Saturday 2 March 9.30am

Kenton United Synagogue, Shaftesbury Avenue, Kenton, Harrow, HA3 0RD

Phone: 020 8907 5959 Website: www.kentonsynagogue.org

Full ‘From Our Lips ...’ programme on the ECA Website www.cantors.eu

