Kol Nidre appeal speech

I want to tell you the story of a religious leader called Mason… not our very own Rabbi Mason, but Pastor Victor Mason, who runs the food bank at Pembroke Road Church in Muswell Hill. The food bank wasn’t in our original list of Kol Nidre recipients- we normally choose 3 to support, and we had already chosen great charities - but then we got the call from the Pastor.

Pastor Mason set up the food bank last year, and Muswell Hill Synagogue was involved from the start, collecting food at Mitzvah Day outside Sainsburys. I went with other volunteers to meet Victor and deliver the food that we had collected, and I remember vividly how overwhelmed he was by the effort we had put in and the boxes and boxes of food. He wasn’t sure how much demand there would be, “we’ll never get through that much”, he told us. As it turned out, he was wrong, as I will explain a little later.

Last year, thanks to your generosity, we raised £33,000 the highest total on record. One of the recipients of the appeal was Jewish Care’s Sam Beckman Dementia Centre not far from here who received over 6 and a half thousand pounds. They told us how important that donation was to people like Ivan and Lucy. Four years ago, Lucy Cohen’s husband Ivan, had a stroke and is now living with vascular dementia and Parkinson’s disease. Lucy said “The centre has made a huge difference to not only Ivan but myself. He is a much happier person since he has been attending, he looks forward to it every week and loves the companionship. I get the time to do things that I wouldn’t be able to when I am caring for Ivan, It’s changed our lives”. So Jewish Care want me to pass on their thanks to you all for helping them to keep providing these vital services

Our Kol Nidre appeal as always is split between various causes, including our own community. This year we have taken on our first ever Community Events Director, with half the costs being covered by the United Synagogue and the rest covered by us, including a significant donation from one member to start the project.

Eli Gaventa has been the first to take on the post, and he has planned and delivered events for the community that focus on our place in relation to our neighbours and to the wider world. Some highlights of his work include planning a wonderful Yom Ha’zikaron and Yom Ha’atzmuut event this year involving young people from the community in a moving ceremony and Hallel service, our Great Get Together Street Kiddush for all of our Tetherdown Neighbours and this month’s Mental Health programming. All activities which approach Jewish learning in a different and original way and allow us as a community to hold events where we meet, eat and learn together. Your donation allows us to continue with this fantastic programme, enriching our community and engaging as wide a section as possible.

As you’ll probably know we’re also looking to improve our own building over the coming years, many of you have already been incredibly generous in your pledges to the building fund. Your donation pledge tonight is not for that project, but if you’d be interested to find out how you can help, there’s a separate tag you can select on the bottom of your card to let the building committee know that you’d like to be contacted. Through the activities we put on here and through the building we will create together we can continue to grow and be the wonderful, innovative and unique community that Muswell Hill is proud to be.

I’d like to tell you a little about the other charities which we are supporting this year:

ORT UK is the British arm of World Ort, the world’s largest Jewish education and vocational training organisation, working in more than 30 countries supporting 300,000 students and teachers.

The money they raise from our appeal will go to support the Jewish community in Vilnius, in Ukraine, through the ORT Shalom Aleichem school.

Like many of their schools, Shalom Aleichem focuses on STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering & Maths). They do this to provide communities and individuals with the equipment, skills and knowledge necessary to help them become economically self-sufficient.

They also provide Jewish and Hebrew studies bringing Judaism to communities and families still coming to terms with the aftermath of the Holocaust and Communism.

Few of the parents in Vilnius grew up either knowing or identifying as Jewish and as such their Jewish knowledge is limited and so for this generation of young people learning about festivals, making challah for Shabbat or singing Jewish songs is their first experience of Jewish culture, As the head of the Jewish Community says, “ we are not only bringing up the children, we are bringing up their mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, Aunts and Uncles, we are bringing up a large circle of people who together with their children receive a Jewish education”

As a community, we have been running a Bar and Bat Mitzvah scheme with ORT UK. Their team run a programme for our teenagers, a scheme that I know last year’s cohort found incredibly rewarding, particularly their trip to Vilnius to meet their fellow teenagers. For our young people to widen their experiences and meet young people from the countries that many of our families originally came from can only help them better understand *their* Jewish journeys and history as they become adults in their own right.

We’re supporting another charity that could have an impact on many of our lives, the Jewish Bereavement Counselling Service.

Most of us recover from bereavement with the support of family, friends, and community. However sometimes this is not enough.

JBCS provides trained, experienced counsellors to support individuals, and families in coming to terms with grief and loss who all offer their services in a voluntary capacity, supervised by experienced, professionals.

Over the past ten years as well as individual counselling at home or by phone, support groups have been offered to allow grieving people to meet and share experiences with others of a similar age.

One of the groups, Butterflies, is for mums and dads of young children who have themselves lost a parent.

It was the Butterflies group that particularly resonated with me as someone who has relied heavily on my own mum when bringing up my three children, I can’t imagine how it would feel to have not had her there to call with questions, problems, and to be someone who I know will share my joy at every single achievement in their lives.

I spoke with Shelia Matttison, one of our own community members who has experience of running the BUTTERFLIES groups, and supervises counsellors for JBCS. She told me that a common theme she hears in the groups is the pain felt by young parents who see everyone else’s parents helping them out: collecting grandchildren from nursery or school, inviting them for Shabbat or Yomtov, telling their grandchildren stories about when their parents were growing up.

Having the opportunity within a facilitated group to share their feelings, helps the isolation, discomfort, and loneliness.

For many bereaved people, at times of the year when other families are getting together with parents and grandparents, the loss of a partner or parent will be felt even more sharply, and to be able to meet with those who understand that loss and the meaning of Jewish milestones can be of huge comfort.

Referrals to the service are increasing – it needs £9000 a year to function and relies solely on client contributions which make up about £4000, they hope to make up a good proportion of the balance from our appeal this year. This funding will provide for a part-time manager and administrator, training of new and existing counsellors, continued professional development, supervision, and the use of appropriate venues.

Finally, we are supporting two food banks, the one I’ve already mentioned to you here in Muswell Hill and one in Israel. Leket Israel was established in 2003 to tackle the paradox of people not having enough to eat in the face of large scale food wastage.

Many of us visit Israel regularly – and when there, we admire Israel’s hi-tech, prosperous society, and we enjoy its fabulous food. But there’s another side to Israel, a significant population of Israelis who struggle to put food on the table.

Leket does something incredibly simple. It takes food that would otherwise be wasted from hotels, the army and other large scale caterers and transports it to an average of 180,000 needy Israelis each week. It does this through a network of non-profit organisations such as soup kitchens, after school programs for children at risk, and community programs that send food packages to the homes of the needy.

Leket have shared with us a few stories of people that they help -

There’s Sarah, who lives alone having been widowed four years ago. She has six children, but she tries to be independent. She lives in Jerusalem close to one of the soup kitchens supplied by Leket Israel. Sarah moved to Israel 49 years ago, after fleeing as a child from Alexandria, Egypt. There, she had nothing and anything the family did have was left behind.

**Leket Israel also provides food in school projects, for students like Elia**, a pupil at Bet Haarava School in Jerusalem. His parents divorced early on in Elia’s life, leaving his mother to take care of him and his 6 siblings on her own.

He says, “I love the food that we get! I used to just bring in bread, but it was not enough. My stomach hurt all day long. Now I have more energy to concentrate. Instead of focusing on how hungry I feel, I focus on my classes.” Elia wants to join the IDF and then dreams of a future career in computing. Regular meals from Leket will help him to pursue that dream.

And then there’s our local foodbank, right here in Muswell Hill.

Pastor Mason was sadly wrong about the demand for food. A year after we first helped the new foodbank, he called Georgie, one of the volunteers who runs our shul social action group, and explained that they were totally over run with clients at the food bank and supplies were running very low. The social action group leapt into action. Judianne, another member of the team started an incredibly successful appeal on her Facebook page. But ultimately, we concluded that the best way of supporting the foodbank was through financial support, enabling them to plan and buy the foods they need most. So we added a fourth charity to our Kol Nidre appeal, a very local one making a real difference to people’s lives right here where we live and worship.

I went to visit the foodbank last week and it was very moving to see it in action. One of the visitors told Victor, that after struggling through the benefits systems, the foodbank was the first time that she had seen a friendly face and been treated as a real person. Everything is set up to make clients feel like they are being treated with respect and humanity. Small tables are set with table cloths and vases of fresh flowers. Clients are offered a hot drink and soup or cake much of which is made by our very own shul cooking club.

Victor sits and talks with each person who comes in, he finds out their story, discusses their problems with them and signposts them to other services that can help.

On the day I went in, I met Sophie, a migrant from Africa who came with a voucher from the benefits agency – marked that she had “no recourse to public funds,” No recourse to public funds… just words on a piece of paper, but words that mean she has absolutely no means to buy food for herself and her 3 month old baby. She was incredibly grateful for the bags of tinned food and baby items she left with and the referral from Victor to a migrant centre who may be able to help her further.

I also met Mary who is 52 years old and gets £800 of Universal Credit a month, her rent is £500, leaving her £300 to pay all her bills, and to eat. She is already receiving all the benefits she is entitled to but is still faced with choices every month between paying bills or eating – and the food bank is her only option to make sure she has some food.

These are just two stories of people that I met at the foodbank, but there are countless others, and this is all happening just a few miles from here. The Church at Pembroke Road doesn’t function any more, through lack of a congregation, Victor is a Pastor without a parish, and is now paid minimum wage by the church to run the food bank. He told me that he sees this role as a better expression of his belief in God than being a Pastor. That to me is what God means, a moment of pure good and selflessness in the lives of people who need it most.

The Food Bank is incredibly grateful to the help they’ve had from Muswell Hill shul- the volunteers who give up time to help there, the food we’ve collected and the cakes and soup we’ve made- I know you all do so much, you give up your time and you are incredibly generous, but this Kol Nidre is our chance to do more and to do it together as Muswell Hill Shul. As a community we can make a real difference, make a serious contribution to the funds of the Jewish Bereavement Counselling service to help them continue to function, to change the lives of children and their families in Vilnius, to give more hot and nutritious meals through Leket Israel to people like Sarah, and Elia and to help Victor and the Muswell Hill Foodbank to continue to be a vital life line for people in our own local area.

I know how generous you all are, I know you give to charities you support, as individuals and as families, but as a community, let’s show the charities we are supporting this year just how generous we can be. Whatever amount you thought you were going to give before you arrived tonight, please add another 50% to it – add more and as a community let’s stand together and show the rest of the world, here in Muswell Hill, in the Jewish community, in Vilnius and in Israel that we are here for them in their time of need, just as we hope they would be here for us.

Gmar Chatima Tova *Thank you*