



COME WITH ME

Address delivered by

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

on his installation as Chief Rabbi
of the United Hebrew Congregations
of the Commonwealth



1 SEPTEMBER 2013 • 26 ELLUL 5773
ST JOHN'S WOOD SYNAGOGUE, LONDON



Chief Rabbi Mirvis was installed as Chief Rabbi on 1 September, 2013 at St John's Wood Synagogue in London. Before he became Chief Rabbi, he earned a reputation as one of the UK's most respected community rabbis, most recently as Senior Rabbi at Finchley United Synagogue. Under his leadership, the congregation was transformed into a vibrant centre of educational, social, cultural and religious activity and the fastest growing community in the United Synagogue.

As Chief Rabbi of Ireland from 1984 to 1992, Chief Rabbi Mirvis represented the Jewish community to government, other faith communities and the media. He joined the UK Rabbinate in 1992 when he was appointed to the Western Marble Arch Synagogue in London.

He was the Founder and Director of the Kinloss Learning Centre (KLC), the Founder and President of the Kinloss Community Kollel and the Founder Rabbi and Honorary Principal of Morasha Jewish Primary School.

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Ze hayom asa Hashem nagila venismecha vo. This is the day that the Lord has made, let us be glad and rejoice thereon.

On this auspicious and historic occasion, when I humbly take on the mantle of the eleventh Chief Rabbi since 1704, I offer two prayers. First, a prayer of thanksgiving. I express my gratitude to the Holy One, Blessed Be He, who has guarded and protected me from the time of my birth and upbringing in South Africa, through to the years of my studies in Israel, on to the time when I had the privilege to lead great communities in Ireland and the UK, through to this special day, filled with joy and charged with opportunity. *Baruch Atah shehecheyanu vekiyemanu vehigiyanu lazeman hazeh.*

And I also offer a prayer of supplication. May Almighty God bless me and those who will work with me so that we shall succeed in our quest *lehagdil Torah uleha'adira*, to magnify Torah and bring glory to its name, *lekadesh Shem Shamayim*, to sanctify the name of God in heaven. May we have the privilege to enhance lives, to transform communities and to make a contribution of value to our society. *Vihi noam Hashem Elokenu alenu uma'aseh yadenu konena aleinu uma'aseh yadenu konenehu.* May the pleasantness of the Lord our God be upon us and the work of our hands, for good, for life and for peace, Amen.

Looking around the synagogue right now, I'm so touched to see so many of you who have made great efforts to come and celebrate with us today from many countries right around the world. But first and foremost, Your Royal Highness. Your presence here today is a great honour, not just an honour for me personally, but a great honour for our entire community. It is a reflection of the passion you have for working with the faith communities in this country. It is an expression of your desire to bring unity and

to promote all the good things that we stand for. Your input and your inspiration go a long way. May I avail of this opportunity on behalf of all present, and indeed on behalf of our entire Jewish community, to warmly congratulate you on the recent birth of your first grandchild, HRH Prince George Alexander Louis of Cambridge. Mazeltov!

We are honoured here today to welcome the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition, Ed Miliband, together with representatives of the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister. I note that you are all sitting on the same front bench in our synagogue, together with notable members of the Commons and of the Lords. I think that we should not read too deeply into this, but rather it is a reflection of the fact that in this house we are all on the same side. Thank you so much for gracing this event with your presence here today.

A warm welcome to distinguished national leaders and communal leaders, revered and esteemed faith leaders, the President and Trustees of the United Synagogue and our good friends from other synagogal bodies.

Beruchim habaim, to close to 200 Dayanim, Chief Rabbis and Rabbis, from Britain and many countries around the world. And in particular it is my great pleasure today to celebrate this moment in the presence of my esteemed colleagues, the Dayanim of the London Beth Din, the Court of the Chief Rabbi. Our community is blessed to have Dayanim, who are Torah scholars of the highest calibre, who are totally committed to the future success of our community and it will now be my pleasure and privilege to work with them.

A special warm welcome to His Excellency, the Ambassador of the State of Israel. As a passionate supporter of Israel and as the first Chief Rabbi to be a product of Israeli Yeshiva academies, and the first to have been ordained in Israel, I am delighted that in our country, as is the case in our community, we have strong, close and warm ties with the State of Israel.

My three immediate predecessors were all installed into office at momentous times in the history of the State. Chief Rabbi Sir Israel Brodie gave his inaugural address in the New Synagogue, Egerton Road in 1948, in the midst of the War of Independence, just six weeks after the creation of the State. Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits gave his inaugural address from this pulpit in 1967, just weeks before the outbreak of the Six Day War. And Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks spoke from this pulpit 22 years ago to the day, and delivered his inaugural address just after the conclusion of the Gulf War.

As I stand before you today, hostility is rife in Syria and we are witnessing some terrible atrocities. And also at this time, Israel and the Palestinians are set on holding negotiations with an eye towards establishing a true and lasting peace. In the years to come, I would love people to look back on this day and associate it with the time when finally we were on the path to beating swords into ploughshares, in Israel and throughout the Middle East. May Almighty God bless our leaders with the wisdom to make wise and responsible decisions through these days, weeks and months of challenge. *Oseh shalom bimromav hu ya'aseh shalom aleynu.* May He who makes peace in high places, bring peace for us all, Amen.

Emeritus Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks. Thank you so much for your prayers, for your warm wishes, for your kind sentiments. Thank you for your friendship and for your encouragement. You have presided over a remarkable era of Jewish growth and renewal. You have become a leading spokesman for Judaism in our generation. Through the sheer brilliance of your writings and your speeches, you have touched the hearts and moulded the minds of thousands upon thousands of people, in this country and indeed throughout the world. And we in your community have basked in the radiance of your success as our ambassador par excellence.

Your legacy will be with us for generations to come. This is the second time that I am succeeding you. The first was when you became Chief Rabbi and

I then became Rabbi of Western Marble Arch, and now, as was the case then, I am in the privileged position to build on your successes.

On behalf of us all, I extend to you warm and fond wishes, may you and Lady Sacks benefit from the showering of blessings from the Almighty, for *beracha vehatzlacha* – blessing and success in all your future endeavours on behalf of the Jewish people, Amen.

Valerie and I are delighted to celebrate this day with our dear family. Our sons, Hillel, Danny, Noam and Eitan, our daughters-in-law, Melanie and Althea, together with Jonny and Batya.

We are blessed with wonderful, darling grandchildren: Kinneret and Elitzur; Naama and Tamara; Raphael and Liora.

We thank the Almighty that our respective fathers are here to witness this day. My father, *Avi Mori* Rabbi Dr Lionel Mirvis with Raisel. It is from my father that I received my passion for communal leadership and my yearning for the Rabbinate. And my father-in-law, Dr Stanley Kaplan with Pia. They have all given us much support and encouragement.

There are two remarkable women of blessed memory, about whom I think many times, each and every day. My mother, Freida Mirvis *z"l*, taken from us at all-too-young an age. In her pious and selfless ways, she taught us the lesson, that when all is said and done, what matters most in life, is not what titles you have had, but rather what kind of a *mensch* you have been. And our daughter Liora *z"l*. Her deep-rooted faith, her remarkable courage, her joy of life and the light that she brought into the lives of many, provide us with ongoing inspiration. She taught us the lesson, that in a short amount of time you can do some incredible things.

A TIME FOR CHANGE

At this moment, I am thinking of the High Priest, who entered into the Holy of Holies on the Holy day of Yom Kippur, to stand before the Almighty and pray for his people, the people he loved. And so too at this moment, I enter into this sacred office and I stand before the Almighty on behalf of my community, the community I love, and our community will always be our top priority.

We are standing on the threshold of a new Jewish year.

The Hebrew for year, *shana*, means “repetition”, as we say in the *Shema*, where the term *veshinantam* means to educate by rote through repetition. *Shana* therefore represents everything that comes time and again in a predictable way, year in and year out. The same months, the same seasons, the same festivals. And within a *shana* we have *chodashim*, months, coming from the root *chadash* which means “new”. And this is because, with the advent of every new month, the moon appears afresh and anew.

We therefore have two interlinked concepts: *shana* and *chodesh*. The constant and the new, fused together to provide us with our unique recipe for a fulfilling religious experience. We are blessed to have a framework of immutable and timeless truths which transcend the fads and fashions of the era, which anchor us in the dawn of time, which link us with successive generations that take us back to the origins of our faith. Built into that framework we have a mechanism for rebirth and renewal.

Every generation faces its own challenges and every generation must provide its response to the challenges it faces. With our minds turned to the past and our eyes fixed firmly on the future, rooted in our tradition and in touch with the world around us, governed by *halacha*, Jewish law, we must find the necessary tools to transform our challenges into

opportunities, as we hold on ever so tightly to our spiritual legacy, which passes through our hands en-route to the generations to come.

Times do change. Twenty-two years ago, when my illustrious predecessor stood on this pulpit, that was a very different world from the one we have today. The Iron Curtain was still falling, the Internet was not an integral part of our lives and Arsenal was still winning trophies.

Yes, times do change.

The beauty of our tradition, the majesty of our heritage, the thrill of a Jewish way of life, accompanied by joy and fulfilment, all of these need to be transmitted, conveyed and articulated in a way that suits our times. I am so excited to be the first Chief Rabbi to be inducted into office in the digital age, providing us with breathtaking opportunities to reach homes, and hopefully to reach the hearts of people within those homes, right around the world.

MY VISION

So, what are the challenges that we are facing in this second decade of the twenty-first century? There is so much that we can be proud of, and at the same time there is lots of room for concern.

We can be proud of the fact that there is today a renaissance of Jewish life, added commitment to Jewish learning and practice, and so we have seen increased levels of attendance in many of our synagogues. This, however, is accompanied by the fact that in the last national census 26% of those who proudly responded that they are Jewish are not members of any synagogue whatsoever. Such a high level of disengagement must be a cause for concern.

We are encouraged by the increase in Jewish children attending Jewish schools. The number has close to trebled within one single generation, what a stunning statistic. But that is coupled with record levels of assimilation.

Within our society, we benefit from the comforts of modern living and from the breathtaking advances in science, medicine and technology, but how can we ever rest when we know there are so many who are impoverished, who need assistance, who are weak and who are vulnerable.

And within our community, we have succeeded in some spectacular ways together, however, we have suffered damage from totally unnecessary communal infighting and ill-will.

So, what can be done?

When the cantor takes the Torah scroll out of the Ark, he declares *Gadlu laShem iti uneromema Shemo yachdav*. Come with me to do great things for the Lord and let us exalt His name together.

Today I issue an invitation to you all: *Gadlu laShem iti*. Come with me to do great things for the Lord. Come with me as I embark on my Chief Rabbinate. Come with me on an exciting and fulfilling journey.

And as we embark on this journey we will be confronted by many challenges and numerous hurdles that we will need to negotiate. We will take on many of them, but in particular, I would like us to focus on three priorities.

In the Ethics of the Fathers we are taught that the world stands upon three things: *Torah* – Jewish education, *Avodah* – service of God through community, *Gemilut Chasadim* – acts of love and kindness. These will be the three major pillars of my Chief Rabbinate:

First of all, *Torah* – Enhancing and deepening Jewish education for one and all.

Secondly, *Avodah* – Building and developing great Jewish communities in the UK and throughout the Commonwealth.

And thirdly, *Gemilut Chasadim* – Enabling us to achieve our potential for personal and communal social responsibility.

So come with me as we embark on this journey, prioritising these three areas.

EDUCATION

Gadlu laShem iti. Come with me, as we deepen and enhance Jewish education for one and all.

The term Rabbi means teacher. As Chief Rabbi, I will be the senior teacher of the community and I see in our Rabbis, my partners. We have a dual responsibility, to be there for those who are already committed and also to reach out to those who do not yet fully appreciate the beauty of their heritage. We will be there for one and all, we will stand with open arms and a smile on our faces, letting everyone know that in synagogue you have a home away from home.

During the past six months, I have had the great pleasure of visiting the majority of our Rabbis and Rebbetzins in their homes, and I am looking forward to the pleasure of meeting all of our Rabbinic couples throughout the country as soon as I can. I have been deeply impressed to witness the high calibre of Rabbinic leadership that is being provided to our communities. I would like to empower our Rabbis further to provide Rabbinic excellence and I would like us to have world-class spiritual leadership, in all of our communities.

I would like ours to be a learning community. That is why I have chosen for the motto of my Chief Rabbinate the verse “*Etz chayim hi lamachazikim ba*”. “It is a tree of life for those who grasp hold of it”.

We shall not seek to impose our tradition on anyone, nor to push our religion down people’s throats. The Torah is there as a tree of life for those who grasp it. We will provide you with great opportunities and invite you to avail of them and to grasp hold of these opportunities to enhance your personal lives, and through your lives to strengthen communities, and through great communities to contribute to our wonderful society.

And therefore, my call to you is: come learn with me. Come and learn with your Rabbi. Come and learn with your friends and soon enough you will realise the truth of what is taught in the ethics of the fathers. *Hafoch ba vehafoch ba dekula ba*. Take the Torah, turn it this way and that and you will discover that it provides you with the potential to achieve your greatest dreams.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Gadlu laShem iti. Come with me, as we highlight the importance of building, strengthening and developing our communities.

There are many terms in Hebrew which are used for a gathering of people. In the Torah there are primarily two; they are *edah* and *kehilla*. What is the difference between them? An *edah* is a group of people who have come together at one time, in one place, for one specific purpose. They might never have met one another before, nor are they interested in meeting one another again but right now they have a common goal. A fine example of an *edah* setting is an audience at the theatre. When you enter into the theatre to take your seat, is it expected of you to say ‘good evening’ to the

person sitting next to you? It is not really expected, but if you do so you will probably receive a polite ‘good evening’ in return. Is it expected of you in addition to then say ‘How are you? Family alright? Is everything OK?’ No, it is not. That could be quite unsettling for the person sitting next to you. And if in addition you say ‘After the show, would you like to come to our home for coffee?’ that would be highly suspicious.

A *kehilla*, however, is something very different. A *kehilla* is a group of like-minded individuals who share a set of values and a vision for their future. They have met one another on many occasions in the past and will be thrilled to be in the presence of one another on many occasions in the future. And through participation within the *kehilla* dynamic, each individual is empowered to do far more than he or she could ever have done alone. When you enter into the *kehilla* context and you take your seat, is it expected of you to turn to your neighbour and say ‘Shabbat Shalom’? Most definitely. And you will receive a hearty ‘Shabbat Shalom’ in return. If you add to that: ‘How are you, is everything alright?’ then your neighbour would engage you in a long conversation, regardless of where we are at in the service. And if, in addition, you say ‘After the service, would you like to come to our home for Kiddush?’ that would be just wonderful because that is what *kehilla* is all about.

In the Book of Exodus we are taught “*Vayakhel Moshe et kol adat Bnei Yisrael*”. “Moses congregated the assembly of the children of Israel.” Moses transformed an *edah* into a *kehilla*. When we were in Egypt, we were a loosely bonded collection of souls who were descended from the same ancestors. When we arrived at Mount Sinai, we were transformed into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation and, through the Torah, we were given a common mandate for life. We arrived at Sinai as an *edah* and we emerged from there as a *kehilla*.

So let us take a leaf out of the book of Moses, who transformed our people into a viable and vital community. Traditionally, many of our synagogues have been just houses of prayer. I would like to transform our synagogues into powerhouses of Jewish religious, educational and cultural experience which will enhance the lives of one and all. And the key to our success will be our Rabbis. Great Rabbis make great communities.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Gadlu laShem iti. Come with me as we take seriously our social responsibility; caring for the weak, the needy and the vulnerable. The Torah introduces us to the concept of *machatzit hashekel*, the half shekel piece, the one coin per person that the nation was invited to contribute to the Sanctuary – that public space belonging to the entire people. The coins were then counted and as a result a census figure was calculated. Consequently, you were only counted, if you gave. Descartes said ‘I think, therefore I am’. Jewish tradition teaches ‘I give, therefore I am’.

And it is in this context that we discover the hallmark of British Jewry. Today I am privileged to become the spiritual head of a most wonderful and remarkable community which fully appreciates the value of giving. A community which is there not only for members of our own community who are needy, but which is there for those who require assistance throughout the country. And so we need to be committed to one and all. We have a great concept in our tradition, called *tikun olam*, healing the world; making it into a better world. *Tikun olam* is based on the premise that we appreciate and recognize that every human soul is sacred.

The Jerusalem Talmud asks the question: “What is the most important verse of the entire Torah?” Ben Azzai gives the answer: “Genesis chapter five verse one, which reads: ‘This is the book of the generations of man on

the day that God created man, in the image of God he formed him.” Ben Azzai wants us to know that the greatest pillar of our faith is recognition of the fact that every human being is created in the image of God.

We must be there for one and all with compassion, giving to our society, engaging in social action of the highest calibre.

If you would ask me, amongst all the great Rabbis of the last few centuries, do I have a role model, somebody who I try to emulate in my life, my answer would readily be to tell you about a great man who lived from 1810 to 1883. He was given the name at birth, Yisrael Lipkin. And because he was raised in the town of of Salant, he became popularly known as Reb Yisrael Salanter. He founded the Mussar Movement and advocated a life of ethical values.

Let me share with you one anecdote, which encapsulates his mindset and his world view. In the 1840s Reb Yisrael Salanter was a Rabbi in Vilna in Lithuania. A matzah manufacturer desperately wanted his *hechsher*, his Rabbinic seal of approval, for his matzah products in anticipation of the festival of Passover. So the Rabbi was invited to inspect the plant. He came to the matzah factory, he was shown around and it was explained to him how the minutiae of Jewish law were being applied. At the end of his tour he was brought into the office of the owner, who turned to him with great expectation and said “Well Rabbi, can I expect your seal of approval?” The Rabbi said “No”. The owner said, “What do you mean ‘no’? Haven’t you noticed, we apply every single stringency in the book, in this plant?”. The Rabbi replied, “I’m sorry, you won’t have my seal of approval”. The owner asked why and the Rabbi explained: “While I was engaged in my tour of the plant I spoke to some of your workers. They told me about the conditions in which they work and the shabby treatment they are given. I will not allow my name to be associated with your products.”

Kosher is not only a concept which relates to what we eat and drink. Kosher is a way of life. Let us adopt a kosher way of life with compassion, with understanding, with tolerance, with warmth, with love to one and all, through social responsibility of the highest order. The Talmud teaches that if there is a person who believes in God but does not act in ways of loving kindness, it is as if that person has no God.

So these then, are the three great pillars of my Chief Rabbinate. *Torah*, high quality Jewish education for one and all. *Avodah*, the building and strengthening of great Jewish communities. *Gemilut chasadim* acts of loving kindness.

Friends, I cannot do it by myself. I need your help.

When the High Priest stood in the Holy of Holies, while he was praying to the Almighty on behalf of the people, the people gathered in the courtyard outside to will him on with prayer. They worked together, in order to get results. And so too, please, will you work together with me? Let us not allow *sinat chinam*, the type of causeless hatred which brought about the destruction of our Temple and the exile in its wake, to stand in our way. Instead, let us follow the advice of the first Chief Rabbi of the Holy Land, Rabbi Kook, who taught that with *ahavat chinam*, unconditional love, we will ultimately achieve our goal of reaching redemption.

This is the second time as well that I am succeeding Lord Jakobovits. He preceded me as Chief Rabbi of Ireland. I grew to love and revere Lord Jakobovits. I recall him once commenting on the *Sim Shalom* prayer, which we say three times a day. Within this prayer, when we ask God for peace between ourselves and our enemies, we say: “*Barechenu Avinu kulanu ke’echad*”. “Bless us, our Father, all of us, as one.” Lord Jakobovits asked, why, while we pray for peace between ourselves and our enemies without, do we speak about peace between ourselves within. And he answered, we

can only seek peace with those who seek to harm us from without, if, in the first instance, we work together as a united people within.

Sadly, in our post-Holocaust era, there are still those who seek our harm from without. I am proud of the many communal organisations that are seeking to combat the spread of anti-Semitism but most of all, I'm proud of the fact that in our country, the fight against anti-Semitism is being led by successive governments and parliament. That is because it is correctly recognised that a threat against the Jews is a threat against our society.

The values of working together, unity and togetherness also underpin the relationship that we should have with other faiths. And I am so delighted that already there are warm and cordial ties between our community and other faith groups in this country and I will passionately be involved in strengthening those bonds further. At times we become confused between uniformity and unity. We presume that in order to have peace, everybody should say the same and think the same. That is uniformity. It was Chief Rabbi Kook who spoke about real unity, through the imagery of a symphony orchestra. In an orchestra, you have different instruments, each providing their own unique sound. Under the baton of the conductor, they blend together to produce a beautiful harmony. And so too within a society, when we respect differences and when we work together under the baton of cooperation, we can produce a beautiful and marvelous harmony for our entire society.

That is my vision for a bright and great future for us all. Come with me to focus on the three great pillars of my Chief Rabbinate.

Torah – Jewish education of the highest calibre. *Avodah* – strengthening our community, creating great communities. *Gemilut chasadim* – social responsibility.

Etz chayim hi lamachazikim ba. The Torah is a tree of life for all those who grasp it. Today I issue this call to you: Come and grasp hold of the opportunities you will have from this day forward and work together with me, to ensure that we will have a thrilling and wonderful future.

Gadlu laShem iti uneromema Shemo yachdav. Come with me to do great things for the Lord and let us exalt His name together.

Come with me *lehagdil Torah uleha'adira*, to magnify Torah and bring glory to its name.

Come with me *lekadesh Shem Shamayim*, to sanctify the name of God in heaven.

Come with me to build and develop great Jewish communities.

Come with me to engage with love and understanding, compassion and tolerance towards all others.

Come with me to celebrate the achievements of the State of Israel and to work towards a lasting peace in the entire Middle East.

Come with me to engage in *tikun olam*, as we will make this into a better world.

May we do all this and much more in good health and in happiness.

Venimtza chen vesechel tov be'einei Elokim veadam, and may we find grace and favour in the eyes of God and of man.

Vechen yehi ratzon, and so may it be His will, and let us say, Amen.

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