

Message from the President of the United Synagogue

In my final Pesach message as President of this wonderful charity I want to share something that might surprise you: a provocative piece of writing from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1808-1888). Rav Hirsch was a principal protagonist in the foundation of a Judaism that is, like the United Synagogue, both proudly orthodox and consciously engaged in the wider world.

In 1837 he wrote something which remains shocking today: "If I had the power I would provisionally close all synagogues for a hundred years. Do not tremble at the thought of it, Jewish heart. What would happen? Jews without synagogues, desiring to remain such, would be forced to concentrate on a Jewish life and a Jewish home. The Jewish officials connected with the synagogue would have to look to the only opportunity now open to them – to teach young and old how to live a Jewish life and how to build a Jewish home. All synagogues closed by Jewish hands would constitute the strongest protest against the abandonment of the Torah in home and life."

What does Rav Hirsch mean? His words carry additional resonance given the difficult memories of COVID-19. How can a rabbi – of all people – dream of closing synagogues?

I believe his words still resonate today. Shabbat morning services are seen by some as the be-all and end-all of Judaism. It's when we see the biggest crowds in our shuls, it's when we welcome thousands of children across our communities.

Don't get me wrong, *davening* in shul with a *minyan* is crucial. As Rabbi Sacks zt'l said, "For it is in the synagogue that belonging becomes believing." But Shabbat morning is only one access point to Jewish life. Successful communities offer multiple opportunities to learn, lead and grow Jewishly. But studies show that what happens at home has the greatest impact on Jewish identity. This is what Rav Hirsch is teaching us.

He is protesting against the idea that dipping into Judaism once a week in shul is enough. On the contrary, he is saying, Judaism has to be lived daily at home, at work and on holiday. We have to find regular touchpoints to inspire our children and grandchildren – and ourselves! – to make Judaism meaningful and relevant to our lives.

At Pesach we have the opportunity to supercharge our Jewish engagement. Pesach is **the** 'home festival'. Seder nights are the most observed Jewish ritual in the world. 80% of British Jews and 97% of Israelis attend a Seder night.

Seder nights – part theatre, part ritual, part banquet – make the story of the Exodus come alive. They are the electric car equivalent of a superfast charger, rapidly filling us to capacity with Jewish energy. But as we drive away after Pesach we have to find regular charging stations to avoid running out of battery. This is Rav Hirsch's message for today.

Shul life will always remain important to the United Synagogue and our members. But through our work in Jewish schools, with young people through Tribe and our education programmes for adults, we will continue to find new ways to inspire people of all ages to live lives as committed Jews.

Chag kasher v'sameach!



Michael Goldstein
President, United Synagogue



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