

# Belfast's reverend

David Kale is the religious leader of Northern Ireland's only remaining synagogue

By Shai Afsai, Belfast

**IN AUGUST** 2018, sponsored by a grant awarded to my Rhode Island synagogue, Providence's Congregation Beth Sholom, I traveled to Dublin, Limerick, Cork, and Belfast to learn about Jewish life in Ireland and Northern Ireland, and about contemporary literature relating to Jews there.

I was accompanied by my brother, Amir Afsai, a journalist who teaches Hebrew at Jerusalem's Sts. Tarkmanchatz Armenian School, and who is acquainted with different conflict zones. Like Jerusalem, Belfast is a city marred by political and sectarian strife. One of the best anecdotes illustrating Belfast's long-standing social divisions, as well as the sometimes-uncertain position of its Jews, is told by the actor Harry Towb in his 1984 BBC2 documentary, *Odd Men In*, which recounts the Jewish community's history and Towb's experience growing up in the city:

*I used to come here in the '30s, to the Jaffe School, for early evening Hebrew classes. And one dark December night, I emerged through the gates and I was confronted by three youths. And the tallest of the trio got hold of the lapels of my coat and he stuck me up against the school railings. And he said, "Hear boy! What foot do you kick with?"*

*Now, I knew what he meant. He meant: was I a Catholic or was I a Protestant? What I was at that particular moment was a terrified ten-year-old. There was only one thing to do and that was to brazen it out with the truth, and I said, "Well...I...I...I don't kick with either foot. I'm a Jew." And there was a complete and utter silence.*

*And the big fellow looked around at the other two and he said, "Hear! Do you hear what your man says? He says he's a Jew! Well hear boy, tell us this: are you a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew?"*

*You know, that's not a music hall joke. It actually happened. And I have a hunch it was quite a common happening around here – common to an uncommon people.*

Towb's encounter took place in the 1930s, but Belfast's current Jewish residents cannot avoid the city's social divisions either. Its few

hundred Jews remain an uncommon people. Over the past several decades, many Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland have taken to using the Arab-Israeli conflict as a proxy for their own political and sectarian tensions. More Palestinian than Irish flags decorate various Catholic neighborhoods, while in Protestant areas there are murals praising the state of Israel. Some of these murals are frequent targets of vandalism by anti-Israel Catholic activists.

This fixation with Israel was also apparent during the Belfast Political Tour that my brother and I took after arriving in the city. As it happens, the tours were already fully booked that day, but when I explained that I was in Belfast to write about its Jewish community and was also seeking some understanding of the city's broader historical context, the guides and organizers of the Belfast Free Walking Tour and the Belfast Political Tour went out of their way to make special arrangements for my brother and me to join. The first part of the Belfast Political Tour was led by an IRA ex-prisoner and its second part by a retired Northern Ireland policeman, each presenting their narrative of the conflict without any pretense of objectivity. At the start of the tour, the IRA ex-prisoner asked the assembled group where people were visiting from. A number of countries were named. One couple said they were from England, and my brother said he was from Israel. The guide then stated: "We have people here from England and Israel. I do not mean to give you offence with what you will be hearing today. I am only describing the truth."

In actuality, Israel was not mentioned even once by the guide during the rest of the tour, but the Jewish state has somehow become such a fixture of Northern Ireland's conflict that the IRA ex-prisoner instinctively grouped it along with England in his introduction. The retired Northern Ireland policeman, for his part, was visibly delighted to find out that someone from Israel was on his tour.

When my brother and I visited Belfast's last remaining synagogue the following morning and met Reverend David Kale, it was only his second Shabbat in Northern Ireland. He and his sister, Avril Kale – a retired pharmacist and,

more recently, a continuing education university teacher – had been in Belfast for just ten days. The congregation was tremendously warm and welcoming to us, and Reverend Kale gave me the honor of delivering the Shabbat morning discourse at the conclusion of the services. I spoke on the topic of Benjamin Franklin's influence on Judaism.

The next day, I visited Kale at his home, which is a three-minute walk from the Belfast Synagogue, and is where its previous religious leaders have also lived. (My brother, in the meantime, had gone off to research Belfast's running culture.) The exchange below with the reverend and his sister is drawn from that initial discussion at their Belfast home, from a roundtable discussion held at the synagogue the following day, and from the ongoing email correspondence I have had with him since our first meeting in late 2018. I had hoped for another meeting in person by now, but COVID-19 intervened.

*You are a reverend, or minister. Neither of these is a title that Jews today in America or Israel would tend to associate with synagogue leadership.*

A reverend is an experienced and qualified person who is authorized by the chief rabbi of the United Kingdom and Commonwealth to carry out all the duties of a rabbi, or to act as *hazzan* [cantor] of a shul [synagogue], without having *semicha* [rabbinic ordination]. A reverend carries out all the duties that a pulpit rabbi in America would carry out. Being a trained *hazzan* also carries with it the title of "Reverend." There are very few reverends today. The position is going to become extinct.

In a small community such as Belfast, a reverend usually leads all services as *hazzan*; acts as *ba'al koreh* [Torah chanter]; delivers a sermon on Shabbat and Yom Tov morning; delivers *shurim* [religious classes]; visits the sick; conducts funerals and stone settings; is responsible for kashrut and acts as a *mashgiach* [kosher food supervisor], ensuring all *kiddushim* [i.e., refreshments served at the synagogue] and functions held in the shul are strictly kosher; carries out interfaith work; and attends

the Cenotaph [war memorial] to remember the Jewish men and women who gave their lives in two world wars. Every town and city in the UK has its own Cenotaph where services are held on the Sunday nearest to November 11 to remember those soldiers, sailors, and airmen killed in both wars. I carry out all the above duties in Belfast.

*What led you to enter the ministry?*

I wanted to become a rabbi from an early age. My maternal grandfather was the *rav* [rabbi] of Machzikei Hadas in London's East End. He came from Lithuania. My paternal grandfather came from Lodz, in Poland, and was a founding member of Ilford Federation Synagogue. I attended Etz Chayim Yeshiva in Golders Green, in North West London, and trained privately to become a *hazzan*, a *ba'al kriah*, and a *ba'al tekiah* [shofar blower]. I have been a *ba'al kriah* and *ba'al tekiah* since the age of 13. I trained as a *hazzan* with Cantor Aaron Segal, of blessed memory, who was the brother of the late *rosh yeshiva* [rabbinical dean] of Manchester Yeshiva.

I grew up in Bournemouth, a seaside resort, which had about six big kosher hotels catering solely for Jewish people, similar to the hotels that were in the Catskills in America. Every hotel had its own shul and Shabbat services. Sometimes they had weekday services, as well. The *mashgichim* [kosher food supervisors] were also retired *hazzanim*, and some gave *de-rashot* [sermons], too. When these men went out of town on holiday, they needed someone to lead prayers and *lein* [chant from the Torah] in their place, and my late father, *alav hashalom* [peace be upon him], would volunteer me to substitute for them. When I was 15, I started shofar blowing at one of these hotels. I started *leining* at age 13, and *leining* became my forte.

*Yet you did not end up becoming a rabbi.*

My parents did not want me to have a career of a *hazzan* or a rabbi, but to have a profession. Consequently, I trained and then practiced for many years as a solicitor, which in America you would call an attorney. However, I regularly substituted for rabbonim [i.e., rabbis] in London shuls when they went on vacation. In addition, I regularly undertook rabbinical duties for the *Yomim Noraim* [i.e., the High Holidays: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur].

*The Troubles drastically reduced Northern Ireland's Jewish population, and there may now be as few as 300 Jews here, most of whom are not young. You were the minister at Staines and*

*District Affiliated United Synagogue, about two miles from Heathrow Airport, for just over ten years, and of Barking and Becontree Synagogue, in North East London, for seven years. What drew you to minister to Belfast's synagogue?*

I consider it to be vital to keep alive all shuls, no matter where they are situated. In my personal opinion, it is so hard to build a shul. It is very easy to close one down. Years ago, Northern Ireland had several shuls. It is now down to just one. This shul must not be allowed to disappear. If, God forbid, it was to disappear, there would be no Jewish representation whatsoever in Northern Ireland.

I also think that we should strive to keep communities going no matter where they are situated. If we do not do this, then in the United Kingdom, for example, there will only be Jewish life in London and Manchester. If we do not support the smaller communities, they will disappear. This will make it extremely difficult for Jewish businessmen who still need to travel from place to place to conduct business. It would also restrict one's choice of where to find work, as there will be no shul to *daven* [pray] at on a Shabbat, and no other Jewish people to mix with outside those cities.

The presence of smaller communities also enables the members of other religions to see and mix with a Jew, and not be frightened that we are different. It therefore provides an opportunity to foster good relations with other religions.

Avril Kale adds: I think that it is very important to have a functioning synagogue outside the main Jewish centers of the UK because it enables Jewish people to live and work outside the main Jewish centers and observe their Jewish faith there. It ensures that the Jewish cemeteries in the town are maintained, and the memories of those buried in them are kept alive. It encourages Jewish people to take their holidays in these regions because they can attend a synagogue and obtain kosher food. The members of these synagogues become very close to one another and treat one another as close family, as opposed to acquaintances and friends.

*How has it been to be part of such a relatively small congregation, which has about seventy members?*

The Belfast Jewish community is known for being warm, kind, considerate and caring. It tries very hard to reach out and welcome all Jews. Its doors are always open to visitors, who are welcomed with open arms. Serving a small

community is very important. It really needs someone to guide them more than a large community. When you are in a small community, a few people carry the burden. Everyone is needed and you feel connected. It is like a family. People look out for one another. They look forward to visitors more and hope people will move in. A small community has a lot to offer.

Avril Kale adds: No matter your age, when you walk into a small shul, people notice. If you don't attend one week, congregants will phone you up to check that you are okay. You build a camaraderie and relationship between each and every one. In a short period, newcomers to a small community become members of a very close family. This is a massive contrast to big synagogues, such as those in London, where you only know and interact with a small number of congregants.

*Tell me a bit about a reverend's hiring process at this Orthodox synagogue.*

I visited Belfast three times: once for an interview, once for a weekend to conduct services and meet the congregation, and once to meet the outgoing rabbi. On the Shabbat that I conducted services, I also gave a *shiur* [religious class] at 9:30 in the morning. There was a lot of audience participation. My *shiur* was about the question of environmental responsibility. What responsibility does a Jew have for the environment? Does a Jew have a greater responsibility for the environment than other people? In addition, I delivered a sermon during the service which connected the *sedra* [Torah portion] of the week to current affairs.

*For me, an exciting part of visiting the synagogue was seeing this large and beautiful building that is so lovingly depicted in Harry Towb's 1984 documentary, as well as meeting in person community members who are featured in Aaron Black's 2014 documentary The Last Minyan: A Belfast Jewish Story, which Aaron's father, Michael Black – the chairman of the Belfast Jewish Community – and mother, Margaret Black, had shared with me before my trip to Northern Ireland. Were you already familiar with the Belfast Jewish community before this position opened up?*

I have known about the Belfast Jewish community since I was a child. It has an illustrious history. One of its former rabbis was Rabbi Isaac Herzog, who served the Belfast community from 1916 to 1919, [later became the first chief rabbi of Ireland, succeeded Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook as Ashkenazi chief rabbi of



Reverend David Kale and his sister, Avril Kale, at their Belfast home

British Mandate Palestine,] and then became the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the State of Israel. Rabbi Herzog's son, Chaim, was born in Cliftonpark Avenue in Belfast. He later became the sixth president of Israel. The Belfast Jewish community has a reputation for being a warm community.

*This is a city and region known for entrenched sectarian strife. Has this affected how you see your role here?*

I have done interfaith work for many years. The Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom Ephraim Mirvis feels there should be interfaith work among rabbis wherever they live. This will also help to combat antisemitism and reduce a feeling of being threatened by one another. Relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish people saved lives during the Holocaust. My grandfather, who was a rabbi in Machzikei Hadas, gave *tzedakah* [charity] to the nuns who came around. He said and believed you must also show non-Jews respect. I have a role in interfaith work, and in ensuring and promoting better understanding among the faiths. I am here to serve the Jewish population and maybe make Belfast more religiously vibrant.

*What has your interfaith work in Belfast, and in Northern Ireland more generally, involved?*

There is the Council of Christians and Jews, as well as the Three Faiths Forum. I have spoken on local radio about how Jewish people celebrate at December time. I highlighted how Jewish people volunteer to help in the hospitals and old age and care homes at this time

of the year so that our Christian brothers and sisters can celebrate their festival with family and friends instead of being chained to their job of caring for others. I have also been featured in a video about the Belfast Jewish Community by the Racial Equality Subgroup. I have spoken on several occasions to hospital staff in the many hospitals across Northern Ireland, explaining the needs of Jewish patients. I have always found the questions raised after the talk to be extremely sensible, and there is a genuine thirst for information to ensure that the Jewish patient feels at home in his or her new surroundings. The interfaith work has been very rewarding. Very good friendships have been struck up.

The non-Jewish Belfast community is very active in remembering and honoring those who died, both Jewish and non-Jewish, in the Holocaust. There is a lot of support for remembering the Holocaust, as well as for Israel. Each year a very impressive memorial ceremony is held in a prestigious part of Belfast. Since I came in 2018, it has been held in the Belfast City Hall. That year, two local councils in Northern Ireland got together and invited all the various groups who suffered in the Holocaust to design and produce two stained glass windows. These windows were produced in time for Holocaust Memorial Day in January 2019, and they toured around the whole of Northern Ireland. At the end of the tour, they were presented to the Belfast Synagogue and installed there. These are the only two stained glass windows in the shul. In May 2019, Prince Charles, together with the chief rabbi, visited the Belfast Synagogue to unveil the windows. There is one

Christian group in Northern Ireland that set up a home in Israel for survivors of the Holocaust. It financially maintains the home. Every year, close to Kristallnacht, it brings a survivor from the home at its own cost to the Belfast Synagogue to address the community.

*The COVID-19 outbreak has deeply altered the Jewish communal experience in Rhode Island. How has it impacted your efforts as reverend in Belfast?*

We are in total lockdown, so there are no services or meetings in *shul*. I try to send an email every day to congregants. I also send a very lengthy newsletter, which not only contains news and details of members' *yahrzeits* [anniversaries of their passing], but an in-depth look at the *sedra* of the week and the *haftorah* [weekly prophetic portion]. I phone every congregant at least once a week, and sometimes two or three times. There is a saying, which is "every cloud has a silver lining." The silver lining for me is that I have built up a rapport with several members who have not attended synagogue for years. Some congregants have asked of me that if I am phoning every member of the synagogue, could I phone their Jewish friends who are living in Northern Ireland who are not members. I replied, "Of course! It will be my pleasure."

I have discovered a few Jewish people that the synagogue did not know existed. And in a small community every single person is extremely important. We are looking forward to the time when we can get back to normal by attending services and socials in the synagogue. ■