

## Rabbi Meir

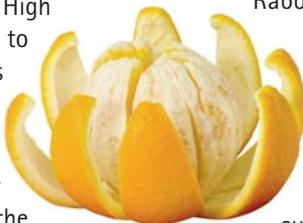
by Rabbi Samuel Landau, Kingston, Surbiton & District United Synagogue

**Chumash:** (Ya'akov was blessing each of his sons before his death; it was Yosef's turn) "His bow abode in strength..." (Bereishit 49:24)

**Talmud:** "It was said in the name of Rabbi Meir: 'at the time that Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Yosef, an image of his father Ya'akov arose in his mind saying: "Yosef, in the future your brothers will inscribe your name amongst theirs on the breastplate of the High Priest; do you want your name to be wiped out?" Immediately, "His bow abode in strength" – his passion subsided! (Sotah 36b)

Rabbi Meir, whose name literally means 'illuminator', was one of the greatest sages of the Mishnaic period. His illumination would shine like a beacon, finding new dimensions within Torah life.

Rabbi Meir's first teacher was Elisha ben Abuya. Elisha was a scholar and polyglot of the highest repute. However, Elisha started to question G-d. There are a number of stories that describe Elisha's 'fall'. He saw a child, instructed by his parents to collect eggs and then send the mother bird away from the nest. Both honouring parents and sending away the mother bird (*shiluach ha'ken*) are commandments that the Torah says will provide a long life. However, the child slipped from the tree and broke his neck. In another account, Elisha ascended to the mystical spheres and was unable to comprehend what he saw, rejecting religion as a result.



Nevertheless, Rabbi Meir still studied with Elisha; he used to say that he was able to access the fruit while discarding the peel. The two respected each other; one Shabbat they were walking and arrived at the town boundary (beyond which one may not walk on Shabbat). Elisha turned to Rabbi Meir and told him: "You must turn back".

Rabbi Meir's wife was a scholar in her own right, called Beruria. Indeed, when Rabbi Meir was incapacitated and could not deliver his lectures, Beruria put up a curtain and delivered them instead. During the Roman persecutions, Beruria's father was executed and her sister taken to a house of ill repute. Rabbi Meir went to rescue her. He disguised himself as a patron and attempted to bribe the guard. However, the soldier was concerned that his supervisor would hold him accountable. At that point, Rabbi Meir advised him that if this were to happen and he would be threatened with death, he should call out: "The G-d of Meir – answer me!" The guard was caught, brought to the hangman's noose and cried out this formula. The rope snapped, he escaped and eventually converted. From then on, Rabbi Meir was given the appellation 'the miracle master'.

The ability to emerge unscathed from a 'dark situation' is a theme present in the quotation above.

# Appropriate Blessings

by Rabbi Daniel Roselaar

Alei Zion United Synagogue

A significant part of this week's sidrah deals with the blessings that Ya'akov bestowed upon his sons as he lay on his death bed. They gathered around him and each son was blessed '*k'birchato*' – 'with the appropriate blessing that he deserved' (Bereishit 49:28).

For example, Yehudah was promised that his brothers would acknowledge him and that 'the sceptre would not depart from him' (ibid 49:10). This is understood to be a prophecy that his descendants would become the monarchs of the Jewish people.

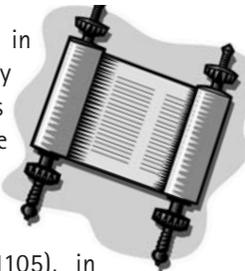
Zevulun was promised that he would 'settle by the seashores' (ibid 49:13), meaning that his descendants would be successful merchants. Yissachar was given a blessing that his descendants would become distinguished Torah scholars.



However, there is a significant problem. Although the Torah tells us that Ya'akov 'blessed his 12 sons' (ibid 49:28), some of those blessings do not appear to be very positive. For example, Reuven was told that he was impetuous and unstable and that he would be denied the privileges due to the firstborn (ibid 49:4). Shimon and Levi were told that because they had been aggressive towards the people of Shechem, 'their anger was cursed and they were to be split up and scattered amongst the Children of Israel' (ibid 49:7). These can hardly be construed as blessings!

A number of commentators address this problem. The Ibn Ezra (Rabbi Avraham ben

Meir d.1164) writes that in fact Ya'akov didn't actually bless all of his sons – as the verses indicate, three of them were actually rebuked.



According to Rashi (d.1105), in addition to the rebuke, these three tribes received a general blessing together with the rest of their brothers.

Perhaps there is another way of dealing with this apparent difficulty. Even though on the face of it, some of the blessings appear more negative than positive, sometimes it can be a blessing to be told things unambiguously. Without Ya'akov's plain-speaking and direct comments, Reuven, Shimon and Levi could have lived the rest of their lives in a manner that could ultimately have been self-destructive. At the time, these were probably difficult words to hear. After all, nobody relishes being criticised. Yet once they had a chance to reflect on what their father had told them, and once they had pondered the spirit and intention of his comments, perhaps they would have realised that he was being gracious to them by telling the truth and not allowing them to remain in danger of mistake.

Though it was King Shlomo (Solomon) who authored Mishlei (the Book of Proverbs), Ya'akov pre-empted him in understanding the truth of the verse: "Do not rebuke a fool lest he hate you, but rebuke a wise man so that he will come to love you" (Mishlei 9:8).

This unique synagogue is often described as the 'Cradle of Anglo-Jewry'. For this reason, I have decided to begin this new series of **Lost Communities around Britain** with a brief look at the community that led the Ashkenazim of both London and the provinces, and whose Rabbi was considered *de facto* Chief Rabbi of England, sometimes described as 'High Priest of the Jews'.

The Office of Chief Rabbi became *de jure* in the tenure of Rabbi Solomon Hirschell (d.1842), whose seat was in 'Duke's Place'. Both he and his successors were considered its Minister and would preach on important occasions of the year. When they were unavailable, visiting speakers were often given the honour of addressing the congregation on Friday evenings, when it was frequently necessary to have policemen outside to control the crowds.

A number of buildings on the same site housed the congregants. The original structure of 1690 was superseded by the 1722 building, paid for by Moses Hart at a cost of £2000. In 1766 it was enlarged. By 1790 it was reconstructed through the generosity of Hart's daughter, Judith Levy, known as 'the Queen of Richmond Green', at double the cost her father had paid. This splendid synagogue had seating for 750. With its huge chandeliers and lofty ceiling, it was the scene of all of the most important services to take place in London. It was also an appropriate venue for occasions such as the Annual Military Service, where two guardsmen of the British Army would play the 'Last Post', the Annual Civic Service for the Lord Mayors of London, the Silver Jubilee Service for King

George V and the Coronation Service for George VI. 1884 saw five barmitvahs on one Shabbat alone. The five participants all survived for the 50th anniversary of this occasion, on May 26th 1934, when they were all 'called up' to read their portions once again. The father of one of them, by then aged 90, stood as Warden.

The musical tradition of the Great Synagogue, with its special melodies for the liturgy of all the Festivals, was second to none. Only the most distinguished chazanim were selected. These included Abraham Katz, Simcha Kusevitsky, Dr Jacob Rivlis and the versatile Hermann Mayerowisch.

These exceptional men were accompanied by legendary choir masters/composers of the calibre of Julius Mombach and Samuel Alman. Historian Cecil Roth writes that Mombach was so highly respected that when he walked into the shul during the Haftarah, the congregation stood up.

An earlier 'Sweet Singer' was Myer Lyon (better known as Michael Leoni). On weekdays he sang on stage, but he was fired by the shul when he broke an agreement by singing in Handel's Messiah! His rendition of *Yigdal* was famously adapted as a Christian hymn.

After its tragic destruction in a German air-raid on May 11th 1941, the congregation struggled on in a Nissen hut under the dynamic leadership of the young Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits. As numbers dwindled, they moved into the Beth Din premises in Adler Street, finally closing the doors on the last day of Pesach, 1977.



*The Great Synagogue, London*

## The Altneuschul, Prague

by David Collins, Executive Director, Tribe

Tribe's 'Learn to Lead' programme for teenagers develops participants' connection to Judaism and Jewish community. This week, in the final part of our series, we will focus on a synagogue in Prague which we visit during year 11, and we will look at the messages that it teaches our Learn to Lead participants.

The Altneuschul, literally the 'Old New Synagogue', is the oldest synagogue in Europe and has been the main synagogue of the Prague Jewish community for more than 700 years. Amongst its most famous Rabbis was Rabbi Yehuda Loew (d. 1609), known by his acronym as the 'Maharal of Prague'. He was particularly famous for his philosophical, ethical and Talmudic works.

The synagogue has a long and illustrious history, including many legends. A famous example is the story of the Golem. The legend tells that this artificial creature, made of clay, was animated by the Rabbi Loew in order to protect the Prague community from blood libel accusations and that it remains in the attic of the synagogue. Another legend posits that the Altneuschul's foundation stones were brought by angels from the Second Temple (destroyed in Jerusalem in 70 CE) 'on condition' that these stones would be returned to the Third Temple when it will be built.



*The Altneuschul, Prague*

The historic Jewish Quarter of Prague, with its synagogues, cemetery and Jewish Town Hall is one of the most popular sites on the local tourist trail. It draws hundreds of thousands of people every year, who gain a glimpse of Jewish life of times past. Tourists learn about synagogues and their rituals, as well as experiencing Prague's current Jewish community.

For members of the Tribe Learn to Lead Trip to Prague, the visit to Europe's oldest synagogue illustrates the continuity of Jewish history – from the medieval period when Jews were confined to the ghetto to the era of emancipation and sadly to the ravages of Jewish life under the Nazis and the Communists.

More than 77,000 Czech Jews were murdered during the Holocaust. The vibrant modern life of the Jewish quarter stands in contrast to the bleak periods of the past. Learn to Lead participants in Prague see examples of both. The signs of rebirth inspire young Jews to see the paths of Jewish history and the permanent link between 'old' and 'new' which is symbolised by the Altneuschul. We hope that they will carry these memories as they learn how to make such links and develop leadership in their own communities.

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