

14 February 2020

Dear TLSE member

It is with an indescribable mixture of emotions that I am writing you this letter. As many of you know, I have family in Southern California, and have been visiting there with increasing frequency in recent months. I have the opportunity to move there, and to work in a congregation in the town where my son and his family reside. I shall be taking up that opportunity in September of this year.

This will bring to an end an association with The Liberal Synagogue Elstree that stretches back more than 17 years. I wish now that I had kept a record of all the young people for whom I conducted bar- and bat-mitzvah ceremonies – at a guess it must be in excess of 150. I know that there have been almost 100 participants in the Kabbalat Torah ceremonies and the associated Almost Legendary KT Trips to Berlin. And I have precious memories of other life cycle moments, tragic and joyful, plus the countless other opportunities to share in your lives, accompanying so many of you through a variety of life-changing experiences. In many ways, you have been my family, being as much a part of my life as I have been of yours. For that I thank you.

There are many highlights in those 17 years. During my time here I've written several books, enjoyed an 11 year run on BBC Radio Two's 'Pause for Thought' slot and seen Watford get promoted (twice) and relegated (definitely once; probably twice...). If pressed, I would say that the high points have been several of the bar- or bat-mitzvah ceremonies for young people who have had to overcome particular difficulties to be able to stand before the congregation and read their Torah portion. For some individuals with learning or anxiety issues, the challenge is extraordinary and there are many for whom just stepping onto the bimah was a noteworthy achievement; never mind actually reading from the Torah. Indeed, as a former teacher (and the word Rabbi means teacher, of course) the most meaningful moments for me have been those times when I have succeeded in bringing new insights to individuals, be they children, young adults or more mature members of the congregation. Such moments often come unexpectedly, and any teacher will know how special such occasions are.

Conversely, my disappointment with the disconnect between children's attendance at Jewish schools and their (and their families') involvement in the life of the synagogue has been well documented. I think a major challenge for the future of TLSE and the Liberal Judaism it espouses and promotes is how to engage not just the 11-13 year-olds in the bar-/bat-mitzvah process but all the generations – particularly in celebrations of festivals for which the Jewish schools close, as well as Liberal Judaism educational programmes and events. In general, I hope that the new structure of Trustees and interest groups, still in a very embryonic state, will develop in a way that involves ever-greater numbers of members in the life of the synagogue and its variety of activities.

Before all that gets left behind, I hope that in the coming months there will be occasions when an appropriate farewell can be said. It will also be important to plan for the future of TLSE and I hope that all members will engage in the task of helping to shape the beacon of Liberal Judaism in south-west Hertfordshire it has been my privilege to nurture for the past 17 years.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pete Tobias", with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Rabbi Pete Tobias

Response from Mike Walton, Chairman

Dear TLSE member

The news that Rabbi Pete will be leaving our community in September and emigrating to California to start a new life with his family there will come as no surprise to those of us who have seen the pictures of him with his grandson. In his letter, Pete refers to his mixed emotions on his decision and my own feelings are also mixed. I am so happy for Pete that he will now be a permanent fixture in Jaxon's life but on the other hand I will be very sad to see him leave us. I will be forever grateful to Pete for inspiring me to become involved in TLSE, which is an aspect of my life that is very important to me. I know that many other members of TLSE feel the same way.

It will certainly be a challenge for the community to fill his shoes and to continue to flourish without him, but it is a challenge the Trustees are ready to face and overcome. We are now looking at Pete's departure as an opportunity to build on his legacy, to try to inject new life into the Synagogue, and to work to address the types of issue that Pete expresses his disappointment at in his accompanying letter.

Rabbi Pete has kept the Trustees informed about his intentions and we have already put a plan in place for the recruitment of a new Rabbi. Now that Pete has confirmed the timescales, we can now put our plan into action and I will write again soon to let the community know the process we'll be following and how we'll be consulting with our membership.

The Trustees we will also make sure there are plenty of occasions over the next six months to thank Pete for all he has done for our community and to wish him well for the future.

I am certain that the Trustees will play our part in shaping a positive future for TLSE without Pete and equally confident that our active members will make a similar contribution to ensure that we go from strength to strength.

Mike Walton