

Secret Shul-Goer No 16: Cockfosters and North Southgate Synagogue

Our secret Shul-Goer is overwhelmed - but impressed - by the use of A4 posters in this week's visit - both in and out of the gallery

Name of Synagogue: Cockfosters and N(orth) Southgate Synagogue

Address: Old Farm Avenue, London N14 5QR

Denomination: United Synagogue (Orthodox)

Rabbi: Rabbi Daniel Epstein

Size of community: 500-750 member families

It was something of a surprise to be invited to review Cockfosters and N Southgate Synagogue. And when I say invited, I use the word advisedly, because, since beginning these secret shul visits, Rabbi Epstein is, to date, the only rabbi that has actively asked for his shul to be visited. I've had requests from many (many!) lay-members to visit their shul. But no rabbi has ever been brave enough to reach out. Until now.

The rabbi's motive was clear; his email explained that he believes his shul is warm and welcoming, but was keen to see what light a fresh pair of eyes might shine on it.

Before my visit, I did the usual preparation, including a perusal of the synagogue's website. It's a little tired, to be honest, and is probably due for an up-date. (The Rosh Hashanah service times are still the top item on the home page, for example.) But I did notice that the website has the most welcoming url address of any I've seen. It's www.ourshul.co.uk which I think is just a little bit brilliant. It hints at the very thing I experienced throughout my visit, namely, a concerted focus on building community.

I feel bound to say that there is something a little bit 'work in progress' about the building at Cockfosters and N Southgate Synagogue. For starters, the walls of the entrance hall when you arrive at the shul are covered with flyers, notices and adverts. Not only are there a lot of them, but they are displayed in a fairly random and haphazard way, to the point that it felt a little disorientating at first.

The layout of the building is a bit ramshackle too, particularly when you wend your way, via twisting corridors and past the kitchen, to reach the women's gallery. That said, among the flyers and A4 notices, there was a very clear sign directing me to the women's gallery, so I knew exactly how to get there. This might seem insignificant, but you'll be surprised how many times I've got lost just trying to find the right door to the women's section.

At CNSS there was no such problem. Indeed, you couldn't miss the door to the women's gallery, given that it too was covered with posters and notices. There were adverts for educational classes, phone numbers for synagogue office personnel, flyers for communal activities, as well as information for wider community events. Clearly, an 'all are welcome' policy extends to advertising space too. And whilst this is undoubtedly to be applauded, I did wonder whether some thought might be put into

how these posters are displayed. I was particularly struck by the rather unfortunate juxtaposition of a notice reminding female congregants to wear a hat, which was placed directly alongside an advert for bespoke head coverings for women suffering oncological hair loss.

But among the adverts for bridge games, toddler circles and charity bake sales, there was one poster that stood out. Ironically enough, it was positioned directly underneath the “Welcome to our Shul!” notice. It warned, in large capital letters, that DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HAPPENS IN THIS AREA, and gave details of how to contact Jewish Women’s Aid. I’ll be honest, it shocked me. Which of course is the whole point of the notice. Of course, I’ve seen JWA posters before; they are often displayed on the back of the toilet door in the ladies’ loo. But I’ve never seen a JWA poster displayed so prominently in a public area of a synagogue before. Honestly, it made me want to give the shul a 5* rating there and then.

The women’s gallery feels rather high up as compared with many shuls I’ve attended, and looks down onto a wide, brightly lit synagogue space below. The tall sloping ceiling of white, wooden panels put me in mind of American Gothic. And alongside one wall, level with the men’s section, there was additional seating for women, with seats that gave a more direct view of the service.

The service itself was standard Orthodox fare, which I was able to follow without difficulty. But for those who struggle, CNSS has developed a simple but very clever system for displaying the page numbers. Dotted around the men’s section, but within view of the gallery, there were A4 cards that displayed the current page number and which were updated throughout the service as each of the major prayers were recited. It struck me as such a simple way of helping those who are unfamiliar with the prayers to follow the service, without interrupting the general flow.

Before the Mussaf service began, congregants were invited to a ‘schmooze’ in the Bet Midrash. I must admit, I hesitated at first. Don’t get me wrong, I like a lecture given by an expert. I don’t mind hearing a guest speaker. But a ‘schmooze’? I always worry that this kind of experiential group learning will involve too much waffle and require embarrassing self-revelation from participants. Whenever I attend one of these things and hear the presenter begin with “Let’s start by going around the room and everyone will say something about themselves” I know I’m in the wrong place. To be honest, there was a bit of that. And I fudged it the first time round until I felt more at ease. But by the end, perhaps once the conversation had been lubricated by a single malt, I found that I was more confident to join in. In fairness, the discussion was both thought-provoking and entertaining, and when there was a difference of opinion, it was conducted in an amicable and considerate way. By the end, I found that I was chatting quite happily with the group of fifteen or so congregants, who were exceptionally friendly and welcoming. It struck me that this was a much better way for a visitor to get to know regular members than sitting in the service or even standing around in the Kiddush.

That said, I do have to mention the Kiddush. Firstly, it’s clear that somebody with a keen eye for detail has taken a look at how the Kiddush operates and made a few small but effective innovations. The best of which was the signage. There were roughly eight tables laid out for Kiddush in the shul hall, two of which had signs that stated that these tables were reserved for children only. If I remember rightly, they even indicated a particular age range for each table. As a result, there was none of the pushing and shoving that sometimes happens at shul Kiddush tables. None of that inter-generational warfare between old men on zimmers, trying to smear a cracker with chopped herring, and groups of nine year old boys, high on Fanta, surging to the tables on the hunt for the last Parkways Florentine.

Actually, on the morning of my visit, there was far more than chopped herring and Florentines on offer. On the way towards the small hall, I overheard a woman whisper three words to her partner. At first I thought I’d misheard her. But as I walked into the Kiddush I realised that I had not. The three

words she uttered were 'Salt Beef Kiddush'. And I have to say that the Kiddush, which included hot latkes and pickles to accompany the slices of salt beef, was really very good.

But it wasn't the food that stood out. Perhaps because I had already chatted to some of the members during the schmooze, it was easy to join in with conversations. I was approached by a good number of people who asked me who I was and the reason for my visit, and I have no hesitation in reporting that I found CNSS to be an incredibly friendly and welcoming synagogue experience. One couple, who had only recently joined the shul, explained that they had 'shul shopped' for over two years before settling on Cockfosters and N Southgate. And another woman told me that she had only started attending regularly in the run up to her son's Bar Mitzvah and she was still going every other week. (Her son is now at university.)

As I chatted to these congregants in the Kiddush, I realised that it really is the little things that matter. Attention to those details that seem insignificant but can make all the difference to visitors and regular members alike. I was struck by a sense that the shul has devised a strategy to help it develop and grow. The rabbi alluded to this in his address, when he spoke about the planned eruv in the area, and the impact that might have on synagogue numbers. In a sermon that put me in mind of Kevin Costner's *Field of Dreams*, he told the assembled congregants that if they build it, they will come. Time will tell if his prediction is right or not. But for what it's worth, I reckon that prospective new members would be hard pressed to find another synagogue as welcoming, warm and inclusive as CNSS.

Warmth of Welcome 5*

Decorum 4*

Service 4*

Kiddush 4*