

A Lively Community: The Liberal Jewish Community of Amsterdam

Clary Rooda



The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality
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Preface

The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality is an independent R & D center, founded in Bar-Ilan University in the spring of 2001 at the initiative of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport, who identified assimilation as the primary danger to the future of the Jewish people.

A central working hypothesis of the Center is that assimilation is not an inexorable force of nature, but the result of human choices. In the past, Jews chose assimilation in order to avoid persecution and social stigmatization. Today, however, this is rarely the case. In our times, assimilation stems from the fact that for many Jews, maintaining Jewish involvements and affiliations seems less attractive than pursuing the alternatives open to them in the pluralistic societies of contemporary Europe and America.

To dismiss such subjective disaffection with Jewishness as merely a result of poor marketing and amateurish PR for Judaism is an easy way out – which we do not accept. Rather, a concurrent working hypothesis of the Rappaport Center is, that the tendency of many Jews to disassociate from Jewishness reflects real flaws and weaknesses existing in various areas and institutions of Jewish life today.

The first stage of all research projects of our Center is, therefore, to analyze an aspect or institution of Jewish life in order to identify and understand what might be contributing to “turning Jews off”. However, since assimilation is not a force of nature, it should be possible to move beyond analysis, characterizing and formulating options for mending and repair. This is the second stage of our activities, and these two aspects are reflected in our name: The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality.

The Rappaport Center views the Jewish People as a global community made up of a large number of nodes that link and interconnect in multiple and complex ways. Recognizing and respecting the wide variety of contexts and aspects of Jewish life today, we realize that insights and solutions relevant to specific communities and institutions are not necessarily directly applicable elsewhere. Yet the interconnectivity of Jews worldwide, enhanced by modern modes of communication, means that novel analyses and responses to problems and issues facing specific Jewish frameworks

are of more than local significance. Thus, work carried out at our center can be of benefit to all leaders, activists and institutions motivated – as we are here at the Rappaport Center – to respond creatively to the challenges of assimilation and to enhance and strengthen Jewish vitality.

The Rappaport Center publishes a series titled “Research and Position Papers”, authored by outstanding scholars and experts. These papers present original and interesting findings concerning issues pertaining to assimilation and Jewish identity. Written at a high level of cultural and conceptual analysis, they are nevertheless not ‘ivory tower’ research; they bear operational implications for ameliorating and improving real-life situations. The research and position papers of the Rappaport Center are an invaluable and original series, and constitute a significant addition to the collection of any public and research library and to the bookshelves of all individuals interested in, or concerned with, the future of the Jewish people.

A second series of publications is titled “Field Reports”. These provide insights and information with regard to specific issues of Jewish life, and give a voice to local community members addressing those issues in a straightforward manner.

We are pleased to present the fourth publication in this series:

• **A LIVELY COMMUNITY: THE LIBERAL JEWISH COMMUNITY OF AMSTERDAM**, by Clary Rooda

Ms. Rooda has an excellent vantage point on this topic, as she herself is a member of the community she presents and analyzes in this fascinating report. Her perspective is enriched by the fact that she has devoted several years to Jewish studies, both in Stockholm and in Jerusalem, thus having gained also a comparative view (in addition to much knowledge). Ms. Rooda successfully weaves quotations from her interviews with community leaders together with her own personal insights and a historical overview of Amsterdam Jewry, to provide a rich portrait of the Liberal Jewish community in Amsterdam, its plans and prospects, thereby creating a fascinating window into the community’s situation, dilemmas, hopes and prospects.

In the spirit of our Center's "Field Report" series, this paper focuses on one specific community – yet has broader implications. It reflects general issues common to many Jewish communities around the world, such as the inherent (and sometimes creative) tension between the religious, cultural and social aspects of communal life; the importance of activities with small children for linking their parents to Jewish life; the challenge of maintaining successful youth activities; and the need for dynamic response to changes in communal context (e.g., "competition" in the field of adult Jewish education programs). In addition, her paper expresses recognition of the fact that the Jewish affiliation of individuals frequently follows a life-pattern not dependent upon objective community characteristics. Thus, she quotes the rabbi as pointing out that:

It is important to have our own youth movement based on Zionism and Liberal Judaism, but over the years you see that a movement like that functions well for a couple of years and then slows down again. But, on the other hand, you can educate the children and raise them within Liberal Judaism, but it is up to them what they do with it. And very often you see the people returning to the LJG when they marry and have children themselves. It is a natural process.

With Ms. Rooda, we, too, believe that Jewish life is a continual balance between the qualities and attractions of what the community offers, and the personal trajectories of individual biographies and preferences. Each community must recognize that even with the best effort and intentions, not all Jews will choose to be actively involved in communal life at all stages in their lives. Nevertheless, it is up to local leadership to try and offer the most compelling, varied and appropriate options for local Jewish life – and thus increase and maximize affiliation and involvement. It is our hope that the insights expressed in this publication can motivate Jewish communities and leaders to take a new look at the strengths and weaknesses of the ways in which they have until now related to community life – and encourage them to seriously consider and implement new strategies, better suited to ensuring the future of this ancient people in today's turbulent times.

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those whose efforts have enabled the publication of this report by Clary Rooda: Ms. Iris Aaron,

organizational coordinator of the Rappaport center, who also took direct responsibility for proofreading and coordination with the press; Ms. Denise Levin (text editor); the Ben Gasner studio (cover graphics), and Art Plus press.

For all of us involved in the activities of the Rappaport Center, and indeed for all Jews and people of good will concerned with the vitality of the Jewish people, the publication of this report is an opportunity to acknowledge once again the vision and commitment of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport. It is their initiative and continued generosity that enable the manifold activities of the Rappaport Center – thus making an important contribution to ensuring the future well-being of the Jewish people. May they continue to enjoy together many years of health, activity, satisfaction and happiness.

Zvi Zohar, Director
The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality

Introduction

This paper was originally written for the conference “Dysfunctional Aspects of Jewish Religious Institutions Today”, held in Stockholm on May 2005 by the European Institute for Jewish Studies in Stockholm (PAIDEIA), and sponsored also by the Rappaport Center. In this paper, I chose to take a closer look at the Liberal Jewish community of Amsterdam, because it is “my” community, as I am a member of that congregation and hope to stay involved with it in the future.

Thinking about the conference title, the first question that came to my mind was: What is dysfunctional? Does it refer to the economical sense or to human effort? My second thought was: I do not think that the Liberal Jewish community has many dysfunctional aspects. On the contrary, it is a flourishing, growing community. But working on the paper, I became more critical regarding certain aspects that I will describe later on.

To get the information for this paper, I used several methods: I read some articles and reports, I used my own experiences as a member of the community and I interviewed the rabbi, the chairman and the social-pastoral worker of the community, who very willingly cooperated.

In this paper, I will start with the history of the Jews in Amsterdam. I think it is important to give some background information and that it is interesting because, in some respects, the situation of the Jews in the Netherlands was different than in other countries. Then, I will describe the current situation of the Jews in the Netherlands. After that, I will focus on the Liberal Jewish community of Amsterdam and the different functions it does or should fulfill. I will end with my conclusions.

I worked on this paper with much pleasure. I enjoyed the deepening of my knowledge and the sharpening of my opinions about my own community. I would like to thank the people I interviewed for their cooperation and for the interesting discussions we had.

Amsterdam, April 2007

1. History of the Jews in Amsterdam

There is no city in the Netherlands with such a strong Jewish tradition as Amsterdam. This is best reflected by the city's nickname *Mokum* (from the Yiddish word for "place", in Hebrew: *makom*; It is also one of God's names), a name still used today, also by the non-Jewish citizens. Through the centuries, about half of all Dutch Jews lived in Amsterdam, at one time forming almost 10% of the city's population. Amsterdam was also called "the Jerusalem of the West". At the outbreak of the Second World War, there were over 70,000 Jews living in Amsterdam.

The first Jews to arrive in Amsterdam at the end of the sixteenth century were Sephardim from the Iberian Peninsula. For centuries, they had lived in Spain and Portugal, making a valuable contribution to the economy and cultural life of those countries. During the fifteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church put increasing pressure on Jews to convert to Christianity (they were called "converses"). In 1492, the Spanish Catholic Monarchs ordered that all Jews must either convert or leave the country. Most of the Jews, including the "converses", left Spain and went to Portugal and to the countries of North Africa, Italy and the Ottoman Empire. When Spain and Portugal were united under one monarch, there was another flood of refugees, and Amsterdam and Hamburg (Germany) became the centres of the Sephardic Diaspora, where trade and (relative) tolerance prospered. During the seventeenth century, the Sephardic Jews had useful business contracts with Brazil, the West Indies and the diamond import trade, and they were able to build considerable fortunes.

Religious Tolerance

The fact that Jews settled in Amsterdam was connected with the city's religious tolerance. In 1597, the Protestant Dutch Republic stated that no one could be persecuted because of his religion. So, Jews were free to marry, they were not forced to wear a distinguishing badge or sign proclaiming that they were Jews, they could acquire and inherit property and they were not obliged to live within a ghetto. There was hardly anywhere in Europe where Jews enjoyed these fundamental freedoms.

The Portuguese Jews who first settled in Amsterdam were so-called "New Christians": they had been forced to convert to Christianity. Some families had lived as Christians for almost a hundred years and had adopted Christian customs. It took several decades before the Sephardic Jews of Amsterdam again openly observed the traditions and practices of Judaism. In 1602, there

is the first mention of a religious service at the home of Rabbi Uri ha-Levi. And in 1614, the Jews were permitted to buy land just outside Amsterdam, for a Jewish cemetery. This cemetery (*Beth Chaim*, in Ouderkerk, on the Amstel) still exists and is in use by the Portuguese community. It has some beautiful decorated marble tombstones with passages from the Torah on it. There is even one showing God sitting on his throne. In 1639, the first public Sephardic synagogue was consecrated, followed in 1672 by a beautiful building still in use today, known as the “Esnoga”.

Ashkenazim

Due to expulsion and persecution in Germany in the seventeenth century, many Jews fled eastwards, but a small number came to Amsterdam. Thus, a new Jewish community developed, consisting of poor Ashkenazim. Their first registered religious service is dated 1635. In 1671, the Great Synagogue was consecrated. This building still exists and nowadays forms part of the Jewish Historical Museum of Amsterdam.

More Ashkenazim came to Amsterdam in the middle of the seventeenth century as a result of persecutions in Poland, Lithuania and the Ukraine. These Jews spoke Yiddish and had their own cultural tradition. Although not compelled to do so, they chose to live together in a close community, near the shipbuilding and industrial neighbourhood in the east of the city, and within walking distance of a synagogue.

Although Jews were accepted as citizens of Amsterdam, they did not have access to trade, industries or crafts that were controlled by the guild system. A few exceptions were made to this rule – for instance by the apothecaries’ and surgeons’ guilds. Most of the Jews were active in professions like peddling, business and banking activities, and industries like diamond cutting and polishing, sugar refining, silk production and the tobacco industry. In general, there was extreme poverty among the Jews; the small number of well-to-do Sephardim formed an exception.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the number of Ashkenazim grew much faster than did the Sephardim: At the end of the eighteenth century, the Sephardic community stabilized at around 3,000 members; the Ashkenazim community grew until it numbered 20,000 members.

Emancipation

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Jews were considered to be a people, the “Jewish nation”, with their own religion, their own language

(Yiddish, Portuguese or Ladino) and their own culture. The Jewish authorities (rabbis and *parnassim* [communal leaders]) were responsible for their communities, particularly for the care of their own poor. This changed with the emancipation of the Jews at the end of the eighteenth century. In 1796, influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment and the concepts of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity (introduced in the Netherlands under French occupation), the Jews (and the Catholics) got full citizenship (under the Act of Civic Equality). This signified the end of autonomy for the Jewish communities and the beginning of a period of greater individual freedom. Formally, Jews had equal rights, but economic exclusion and poverty continued to exist.

The emancipation of the Jews also meant that Judaism was limited to being a religion and that the Dutch state, through its Ministry of Religious Affairs, controlled many aspects of Judaism. The decision of 1817 to introduce the Dutch language into Jewish education and religious services had far-reaching results. Within a few generations, Yiddish had disappeared as the main language of the Jewish community. Education was also available for girls and this had a big impact on the emancipation of Jewish women. The Dutch constitution of 1848 drew a sharp distinction between church and state, whereby the Ministry of Religious Affairs was no longer responsible for Jewish matters. Jewish children started to attend state schools; religious education was given after school hours, but did not attract large numbers.

Another sign of integration (some might say: assimilation, not integration) was that, in the course of the nineteenth century, the services in the *shuls* [synagogues] were adapted to Dutch customs. The services were thought to have been too “un-churchly”, therefore, choirs were introduced and it was forbidden to wear caps. But, the attendance of synagogue services and the observance of the Shabbat and *kashrut* [Jewish dietary norms] slowly declined. Jews became more assimilated into Dutch society, and the ties with Jewish tradition and culture grew weaker.

Around 1900, sixty thousand Jews were living in Amsterdam. Due to the flourishing diamond trade, on which almost 30% of the Jewish families depended, people could afford to let their children study or set up their own small businesses. But, still most Amsterdam Jews earned their living as peddlers, barrow boys or buyers-up of second-hand garments and metal goods. The Jewish proletariat was behind the founding of the first Dutch trade union. Jewish Amsterdam was characterized by a well-integrated Jewish elite, religious leadership tending towards orthodoxy, and a large mass that was growing more secular and more socialist.

Already before the Second World War, complaints within the Orthodox world were heard about "three-day Jews", i.e., Jews who went to synagogue only on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. On the High Holidays, at the most 10% of Amsterdam Jews would be in synagogue, while on regular weekdays and Shabbat, even less Jews attended services. On the other hand, 90% of the Jews kept the traditional Jewish rites of circumcision, marriage and burial. In the beginning of the twentieth century, less than 10% of the marriages were with non-Jews, while in the 1930s the percentage of mixed marriages was already over 30%, and this at a time when Protestants and Catholics hardly intermarried at all.

2. Dutch Jews Today

It will remain an unanswered question how the Dutch Jews would have continued this centuries-long process of integration/assimilation in the Netherlands. The *Shoah* [Holocaust] caused a dramatic hiatus in this story. In the Netherlands, 105,000 of the 140,000 Jews were murdered; in Amsterdam only 10,000 of the 70,000 Jews who lived in the city before the war returned.

Many survivors no longer wanted to live as Jews out of fear and despair. Some even chose to convert. But, over the years more and more people or their (grand)children returned to their tradition. This is the reason for the insertion of a special prayer in our *siddur* [prayer book] to support those who come “out of hiding” and return to Judaism. Besides all these personal tragedies and traumas, the Jewish community today still feels the lack of knowledge that disappeared with all those who were murdered. The natural process of growing up in the Jewish tradition and gaining knowledge from one’s parents and grandparents was cruelly disturbed.

Five years ago, a demographic investigation was conducted among the Jews in the Netherlands. In earlier researches, only the members of the Jewish communities were counted as Jews, which until 1920 was easy since 99.5% were affiliated. In this recent research, the definition of a Jew was: people with at least one Jewish parent. So, it also included people with a Jewish father.

Today, there are about 35,000 - 40,000 Jews living in the Netherlands; about 70% are halachically Jewish (born of a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism). In general, the Dutch Jews are very well educated and there is a remarkably high participation of women on the labour market. There is a relatively high number of elderly people: 20% are 65 years or older. Most Jews live in the west of Holland, 44% in Amsterdam (and the surrounding cities). About 8,000 were born abroad (mainly in Israel and FSU). Less than 30% belong to a religious community: Of this group, 58% belong to an Orthodox community, 32% to a Liberal community and 9% to the Portuguese community. 50% of the halachic Jews marry other halachic Jews; 20% of those with a Jewish father marry other Jews.

3. Liberal Jewish Community in Amsterdam

Liberal (or Reform) Judaism started in the nineteenth century in Germany. By modernising the service, praying in the language of the country, introducing a choir and an organ, they tried to stop the process of Jews becoming alienated from their tradition and to attract Jews to attend services. Liberal Judaism places less stress on the ritual practices of the religion and the observance of the *mitsvot* [commandments], and it adapts *halachah* [Jewish Law] to current circumstances. It emphasizes the ethical content of Judaism, as taught by the Prophets.

By c. 1840, Liberal Judaism had spread to Western Europe and America. It was only in the Netherlands that the need to reform Judaism came later, probably because the Orthodox practice was already rather liberal here. A good example of Orthodox Jewish life before the war is the story of Sig Menko, who agreed to become the chairman of the Orthodox community in Enschede only on condition that he could drive his car and smoke cigars on Shabbat. And that was accepted by the community.

In the years 1930-1931, the first Liberal Jewish communities were founded in the Hague and Amsterdam by German Jews who had left their country. After the *Shoah*, the decimated community in Amsterdam almost closed the congregation. In 1953, they decided, by the margin of one vote, to continue with the congregation. Subsequently, the community started to grow again, especially when Jacob Soetendorp was appointed as the new rabbi. In 1966, thanks to donations from abroad, the congregation consecrated its new synagogue, the first synagogue in the Netherlands to be built after the *Shoah*. At that time, people laughed at its size: such a big building for such a small community. But right now, it is an expanding congregation with 1,700 members and about 170 children attending Jewish classes on Sunday morning each week. Our current building has become too small and, within a few years, we will have a new large synagogue complex, a real community building. Today, in addition to the congregation in Amsterdam, there are eight other Liberal communities all over the country, with a total of over 3,500 members.

The term "Liberal" Judaism is rather confusing, since it has different meanings in different countries. Compared to American standards, our congregation is more conservative than reform. Almost the whole service is in Hebrew, and we include the *musaf* [additional prayer] service on Shabbat morning. Men and women are treated equally: We have mixed seating solely, women can read from the *Torah* and can have an *aliyya* [be called up to the Torah], be the *chazzan*

[prayer-leader], etc. When a girl becomes *bat mitzvah*, she does the same as a boy at his *bar mitzvah*, i.e., reads her *Torah* portion and the *Haftarah* [portion from the Prophets], reciting all the *berachot* [ritual blessings]. But, the *minhag hamakom* [local custom] differs from community to community: Not all Liberal congregations in the Netherlands have the same level of participation of woman or, for example, allow them to wear a *tallit* [prayer shawl]. Until now, we did not have a woman as rabbi. But, that will change within a few years, since four women are training to become rabbis at our own Levisson Institute for Rabbinical Training.

Dysfunctional Aspects

I started my research by reading a report on an investigation conducted in the year 2000 among the members of our community on the “Ideology, Wishes and Needs of the *Kehilla* [community]”. I remember that I, as a member, also filled out the questionnaire, but could not recall ever hearing about the results. I used the main issues of this report as guidance in my interviews with the chairman of the board, Mieke van Praag-De la Parra, Rabbi Menno ten Brink, and Social-pastoral worker Madelon Bino-Meijers. Below, I will discuss the main subjects of the functional and dysfunctional aspects of our community.

General

Asked about their motives to be a member of the Liberal Jewish Community (LJG), most people answer that the social aspect, the traditions and the continuation of the *kehilla* are the most important. Other reasons to be a member are to have a Jewish burial and to give one’s children a good Jewish education and a *bar/bat mitzvah*. Only for half of the members, is religion less important than social and traditional reasons. But, I always have difficulties with the word “religious”, and unfortunately it is not defined in the questionnaire, even though it has different interpretations: Sometimes, it is equivalent to observance; at other times, it has more the meaning of tradition or attending services. For me, it has a more spiritual connotation. And I realise that I use this word a lot in this paper, even when the meaning is not very clear.

Core Activity

We are a Liberal Jewish religious community. That is what distinguishes us from other Jewish organisations in Amsterdam and that forms the basis of our right

of existence. That is what we all agree on. But, the emphases that people place are slightly different.

The Rabbi starts with saying that the synagogue is the heart (the core activity) of the community and around it we can have social activities to attract people to the synagogue (as a kind of outreach work). "Through other activities you can also give people more knowledge and understanding of Liberal Judaism, but the synagogue forms the starting point and everything else is build around that". And he points at the three functions of a congregation: *beth midrash*, *beth tefillah* and *beth kneset* [house of learning, house of prayer and house of gathering].

In the eyes of the Chairman, the main task of the LJG is to provide a warm, Jewish home for its members, "A place not only with a religious, but also with a social function where people feel at home. Of course the religious aspect forms the basis of the community, but there is also a need to be together as Jews. Some people attend the service only for the coffee afterwards and to meet other Jews".

Synagogue

The community has 1,700 members, but on a regular Shabbat (no holiday, no *bar/bat mitzvah*) about 70-100 people attend the service. The people who attend the services change every couple of years: There is a faithful group of elderly people who have been coming regularly for 20 or 30 years; then, there is a "newcomers" group who do not know much, come some years and then disappear; and then there are people who come every now and then or for special occasions (*bar/bat mitzvah*, *yahrzeit* [memorial day], etc.). Our former rabbi used to say that every 15 years you would have a brand new congregation. It is also a natural process: Every year some of the faithful old members die, while others move to Israel.

The Rabbi: "The fact that there is a Liberal Jewish congregation in Amsterdam is very important, so that children can celebrate their *bar/bat mitzvah* in synagogue, so that we have our own *mohel* [circumciser] to do the *brit milah* [rite of circumcision] and our own *chevreh kaddisha* [volunteer burial society] for burials. We are the centre of Liberal Jewish life. And through the synagogue, you will attract other people and they will start to practise Judaism at home. In earlier days, people did not know how to do a *Seder* [Passover ceremony] at

home, so most people came to the one at synagogue. Nowadays, people are more educated and have one at home”.

“The synagogue, the *beth tefilla* [house of prayer], plays a very important role. Not all the members come every Shabbat to synagogue. But, at certain moments in their life, or during the year, it is an important anchorage to them, a place to say *kaddish*, for example. With every religious institution, you see that very few people attend the services. It is the same in the Orthodox community, and was the same before the war when people tended to be socialists, rather than religious Jews. In the general society in Amsterdam, less and less people go to church, but in our community the contrary is happening. More people come to *shul* than before. In earlier days, sometimes it was a problem to have a *minjan* [prayer quorum]. Last *Tu B'shewat seder*, we had 230 people and last Purim about 400 people attended the service. These included not only our own members, but also quite a lot of Israelis”.

The Chairman: “The Board must facilitate the religious aspect of the community and make sure it functions well, which it does: We have a rabbi, a *chazzan* and members who are active in different committees (like the committee responsible for the character of the prayer service and the committee responsible for *chevreh kaddisha*). The Rabbi is the authority on Jewish subjects, he is the expert on *halachah*. But, the Board is in the end responsible, also financially, so not everything the rabbi wants to do can be realised. I hear very little criticism from people about the services, they function well. Some people find the service on Shabbat morning too long (about two hours), but I do not think it would make any difference if we would shorten it. You could ask the question whether it has something to do with the building itself or with the position of the *chazzan* (standing in front of the congregation facing the *Aron ha-Kodesh* [Holy Ark], with his back to the community). Having it the Sephardic way, with the *bima* [stage] in the middle and the congregation on both sides facing each other, would perhaps be better. In the summertime, when less people come to the service, we sit like that, which is more intimate. The majority of the members also would like to have the *bima* in the middle”.

I share the view of the Rabbi that it is important to have a Liberal Jewish congregation in Amsterdam, to offer people the opportunity to attend services, to celebrate a *bar/bat mitsvah* or a *chuppa* [wedding ceremony]. And I agree with the Chairman that – for the number of people to come to a service – it would not make any difference what you change in the services: Every new

measure would attract a certain number of people, but at the same time repel others. But, I have become more and more critical of our synagogue, especially after my stay in Stockholm (I spent one year in Stockholm studying at PAIDEIA – The European Institute for Jewish Studies in Sweden). The LJG was the first synagogue I ever entered and where I learned the basics about Judaism. But, after visiting other services, participating in the egalitarian service in Stockholm, for example, and feeling the joy of Shabbat in synagogues in Jerusalem, I think that our service is very “Calvinistic”, very formal, something I recognized in the Great Synagogue in Stockholm as well. I feel more like an observer than a participant in the service; I feel a lack of creativity and *kavvanah* [intention] in the service. But I think it also says something about my own development. Going to a service for the first time, everything is unfamiliar and unknown, it is nice to have a rabbi and a *chazzan* leading the service, and having basically the same service every week. I had to learn Hebrew, liturgy and how to find my way in the *siddur* [prayer book]. And I thought that the way we have our services is how it is done. But, along the way, when I learned more and saw more, I started to appreciate the differences, and especially having a service with a small group of people and offering the opportunity for people to participate. So, today I consider myself as a “wandering Jew”, sometimes I go to an Orthodox service, sometimes to a Reform one, sometimes to the LJG and sometimes I just stay at home.

Education

The LJG offers several courses to its members, their partners and children: For adults, the Study Centre organizes courses on several subjects (that vary from “How To Lead your own Seder” to “Women in the *Tanach* [Bible]” and “The Story of Bilam”), there are weekly classes in Judaism for children, while there is a two-year course for people who want to become Jewish (when they are accepted for the *giyyur* [Judaizing] procedure).

The Chairman: “Education is an important tool to strengthen the Liberal Jewish identity of our members. In that respect, it is a pity to see that the position of the Study Centre is problematic. For years, it functioned well, but now it is facing competition with Crescas, Study Centre for Judaism (a national, Jewish educational institute founded five years ago with restitution money of the Dutch government), that offers courses for people with a Jewish background. So, the Study Centre is re-orientating its mission and will focus on specific Liberal Jewish topics. The attendance of a course also depends on who is teaching,

and because of the Shoah much knowledge was lost. There is a gap in the knowledge that was passed on from generation to generation and it takes time to regain it. On the other hand, it is interesting to see that more and more children become *bar/bat mitzvah*. We have about 25 *bné mitzvah* a year.

Ten years ago, about 80-90 children attended Jewish classes. Now, every Sunday morning, over 160 children, between four and 12/13 years old, attend *Talmud Torah* [Jewish education lessons], where they learn Hebrew, Jewish history, about the Festivals, etc. Before the lessons start, there is a short service together with their parents. This is a different group than the people who come on Shabbat, but for them it is important to give their children a good Jewish education”.

Besides this kind of education, the Rabbi also points at the family education (intergenerational activities around a certain issue for all ages) and the services we have once a month for the very young children: “They partly attend the regular service and partly have their own service in a separate room where they sing, listen to stories and are creative. The children learn while they are playing, but also the parent or grandparent who has to come along does. This is a very accessible and natural way of learning. We also have very serious courses for adults organised by our own Study Centre. The question is: what kind of courses do you offer? What kind of courses do people want to do? If you compare to the situation ten years ago, much more is going on in Jewish Amsterdam, people have much more opportunities to go to events. But all the learning activities the LJG offers, the function of *beth midrash* [house of learning], have to do with our religious function, that is inseparably intertwined”.

Over the years, I myself have attended quite a number of courses offered by the Study Centre, as well as before Crescas started operating, and the small number of people that attended the courses always surprised me. I simply think that many members are not interested in acquiring more knowledge or are busy with other things. And I think it is a pity that the rabbis do not give more lectures and courses: Due to their busy job, they lack the time for it. Recently, the Study Centre (re)started *lernen* [learning] after the service on Shabbat morning. Once a month, the rabbi, or one of the members, prepares a *shiur* [lesson] that is attended by 15-20 people. I think this is a very good initiative and that we should have more study sessions like that. And that we should study more *Talmud*, especially in the *chavruta*-way [interactive learning in twos or threes]. But, that also depends on good teachers to help us through the material and those people

are hard to find. And I realize that it is my passion to want such studies, but in that respect I do not think that I am a “regular” member.

Youth Movement

Over the years many initiatives have been taken to have a well functioning Liberal Jewish youth movement. It is especially difficult to engage the ongoing commitment of young people between 12/13 and 18 years, as they are busy with many other things. A couple of years ago, the LJG started a new youth movement, by the name of *Netzer*, that is affiliated to *Netzer-Olami*, the worldwide Zionist and progressive Jewish youth movement.

The Rabbi emphasises the importance of a youth movement. Many people who are now active in our community (including he himself and the rabbi in the Hague) were trained and educated in a youth movement. “Some of our children are members of *Habonim*, a movement based on socialism and Zionism, but not a religious organisation. It is important to have our own youth movement based on Zionism and Liberal Judaism, but over the years you see that a movement like that functions well for a couple of years and then slows down again. But, on the other hand, you can educate the children and raise them within Liberal Judaism, but it is up to them what they do with it. And very often you see the people returning to the LJG when they marry and have children themselves. It is a natural process”.

The Chairman shares the worries of the Rabbi about our own youth movement and agrees that we should have one that stands between *Habonim* [=socialist-secular] and *Bne Akiwa* [Orthodox-Zionist].

I must admit that I do not know very much about our own youth movement, I have never been involved myself, but I can see the importance of it. But I also think that perhaps the Amsterdam Jewish world is too small to have our own movement. We are talking about a small number of children, relatively speaking.

Social Activities

Within a couple of years, we will have a new building that will be more of a community building, than just a synagogue. The intention is also to have a daycentre for children, a coffee corner where people can meet or read a paper, and more classrooms. Recently, the LJG appointed a social-pastoral worker,

Madelon Bino-Meijers, who will also focus on this kind of activities and try to get more people involved and active.

The Social-pastoral worker wants to organize more social-cultural events: "Not necessarily religious events, although Liberal Judaism is always the starting point that is why people come to us and not somewhere else. There is a need for people to meet each other and have a Jewish network. And I would like to organize more events around a certain theme. Now, many committees within the community are working on something without knowing what the others are doing. Having a good combination of learning/educating and fun will attract people. People are too busy to attend a course that is held five or eight times, but are rather happy to come to an event for one evening or afternoon".

The Chairman, too, wants to give more room for social activities, for a place where Jews can meet and talk about all kinds of subjects, not necessarily limited to Judaism. "For example, have discussions, cultural events or organise a meeting where parents can talk about the bringing up their children. But our building is not suitable for it and there are not enough volunteers to help organize".

The Rabbi: "The *beth kneset* (house of gathering), the place where people meet, is one of the functions of a Jewish community. It is valuable that Jews meet each other, after the service or when they play bridge together, but the religious Judaism forms the leading thread".

I think that, especially on this subject, you see the difference in emphasis about the tasks of the community between the rabbi, on the one hand, and the Board and Social-pastoral worker, on the other, something that is inherent to their positions. For me, the religious activities are more important than the social-cultural ones. But, I think that for most of the members it would be the other way around. And it can be a good way to attract people and get them involved. Also, I do support the wish of the Social-pastoral worker to organize events around a certain theme. But I also would like to have intensive, long-term courses and not only one-time events.

4. Conclusions

There are two subjects I did not discuss, because of lack of time and space, but that I would like to mention:

1. The differences and similarities in the integration process between Jews and Muslims in the Netherlands, and the LJG's "Commission for Dialogue", which started to organise meetings between us and a Turkish Muslim congregation, a subject I am personally interested in.
2. The difficulties "newcomers" and new members encounter within the LJG. The LJG is experienced by quite a large number of people as not a very friendly, warm and welcoming community, and this is a subject of concern for the Board, the last couple of years. Measures are being taken, like having two members to welcome and guide new people every service, but it still needs our attention.

In general, I think that the LJG is a lively and well functioning community. The fact that within a couple of years we will move to a new synagogue annex community centre proves that. It is also interesting to notice that right now we do not have a *mikveh* [ritual bath], people have to go to one of the other communities, but we will have one in our new centre. In that respect, the LJG will fulfill the needs of the community better.

But, I also notice a tension between the needs of the members and the opinions of the Rabbi and the Board. I think that in every community there is a certain distance between Board and members and that there is a delicate balance between Board, rabbi and community. The saying "two Jews, three opinions" shows how hard it is to have one community and that is also the case in Amsterdam. You will never succeed in realising the needs of all the members, since the differences are big. I think that one of the tensions is that while on the one hand the Board says that they primarily listen to the needs of the members, on the other hand it is clear that they, and the rabbi, also have a vision, an ideal to educate people in Liberal Judaism. And the question is whether the members are interested in that. I think that it is a good initiative to have appointed a social-cultural worker who will work on building a stronger community, especially when looking at the future and thinking about the functions and the opportunities a new community centre offers.

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