

## Opinion



# How lucky we are to be Jewish and British

**RICHARD VERBER**  
COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR,  
UNITED SYNAGOGUE

**L**ast year 526 people made aliya from the UK, according to figures from the Jewish Agency. Are you thinking of moving to Israel?

It's a question the rabbis considered: do Jews have a religious obligation to live in Israel? The Torah is clear Israel is central to Jewish life. The performance of mitzvot (commandments), has, in some cosmic way, more power when done in Israel than outside.

But since the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians and later the Second Temple by the Romans there have been sizeable communities outside Israel. Now we have Jewish autonomy again in the modern state of Israel, should we all move back?

The rabbis disagree. Rambam (Maimonides) does not list the obligation to live in Israel as one of the 613 mitzvot, though he rules you are obligated once living in Israel to remain there (except for a few very specific reasons).

The Ramban (Nachmanides) disagrees and says there is an obligation to move there.

The great 20th-century rabbi, Rav Moshe Feinstein, rules though one is doing no wrong by living in the diaspora, moving to Israel is an optional, rather than obligatory, mitzvah and one is rewarded for doing so.

These questions are on my mind having spent a week in Israel on the Nachum Goldmann Fellowship (NGF) with community leaders from around the globe. The fellowship might be, as one participant put it, the best-kept secret in Judaism, bringing together young leaders to connect and learn then return home invigorated and inspired to develop their communities further.



**WITH TALENTED  
YOUNG LEADERS,  
THE DIASPORA HAS  
A BRIGHT FUTURE**

The fellowship is run by the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, now under the wise leadership of Jonathan Arkush, former president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews.

The British Jewish community is not without its challenges, of course, but having heard some of the difficulties facing other communities I realise how lucky we are.

Across the UK, we have hundreds of synagogues, schools, kosher restaurants and cultural institutions from which our 300,000 Jews can choose.

In Paraguay, a country of 6.7 million people, there are only 200 Jewish families. The burden of leadership falls on just a handful of families to keep the community going.

Cape Town remains a wonderful place to be Jewish, but the community has shrunk by 60 percent in the past few decades with thousands of South Africans moving to the UK, Australia and Israel.

I learned from American participants that in some shuls talking about Israel has become so polarised that many rabbis have stopped mentioning the Jewish state from the pulpit.

This might sound very downbeat. But

without downplaying the real problems which exist across Jewish communities in the diaspora, NGF gave me a lot of room for hope.

If we can empower these talented young leaders to take their communities forward alongside rabbinic leaders, the diaspora has a bright future.

I know from our community development work at the United Synagogue shul leadership is not always easy, but community volunteering brings rewards no other voluntary role can.

The transformational impact on individuals and families is second to none and you can point to tangible results that have changed lives as a result of the time and effort you have personally invested.

The story of the Jewish people has rarely been an easy one and there is surely no Jewish community today without challenges – even if it must be one of the best times in history to be Jewish. But having met such gifted, passionate and committed leaders, their Jewish communities are in the very best hands.

◆ **More info about the fellowship can be found at [www.ngfp.org](http://www.ngfp.org)**