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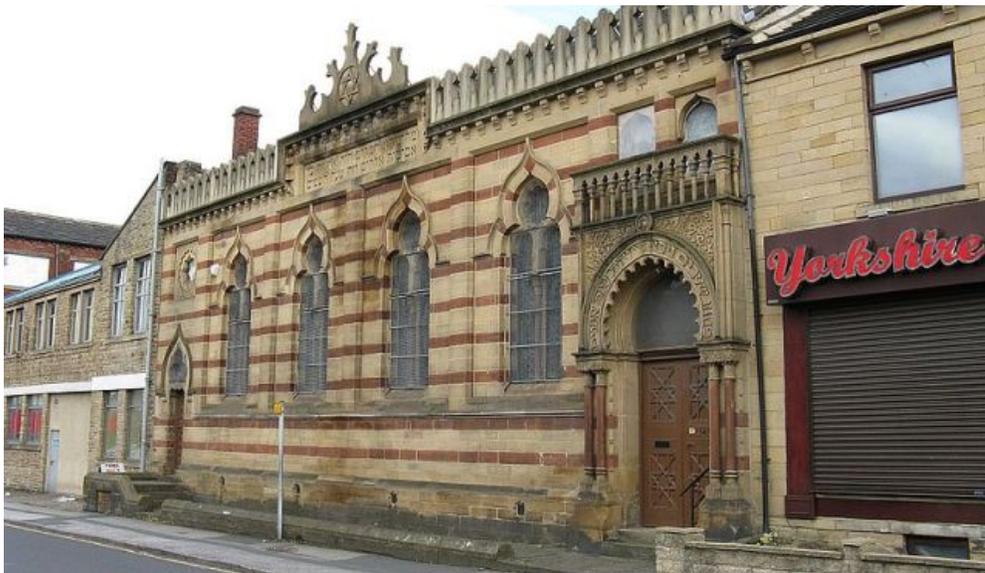
In one hard-knock British city, a secret Muslim donor helps save a synagogue

The Bradford Synagogue in northern England was facing a dwindling population and serious financial woes when the local Muslim community reached into its pockets to save the day.

By Hadani Ditmars | May.21, 2013 | 3:27 PM | 10

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Bradford Liberal Synagogue. Photo by John Yeadon

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Bradford, a city of 300,000 people in the British county of West Yorkshire, is no stranger to social unrest and racial conflict. Once a boom-town of the Industrial Revolution and the former center of Britain's textile industry, the infamous race riots here in 1995 and 2001, exacerbated by neo-Nazi organizers, placed this economically starved region in an unflattering spotlight.

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But in 2010 this hard-knock spot got a bit of a boost. Bradford was named a "city of sanctuary" in 2010, noted as a place with a history of welcoming newcomers from all corners of the world. These peoples included Jewish immigrants in the 1930s who fled persecution in Continental Europe, as well as Pakistani and Bangladeshi economic migrants who came in the 1960s, just as the first Jewish immigrants in the late 19th century had, to work in the textile industry. So many immigrants poured in from South Asia that the city came to be known as the curry capital of Britain.

Even more recently, a bit of serendipity in the form of leaky roof brought together the city's Jewish and Muslim communities.

For years, the Jews and Muslims of Bradford have lived in close proximity to each other: Bradford's only remaining synagogue sits just 500 meters from the city's main mosque in the inner city neighborhood of Manningham. But the two groups kept to themselves. That is, of course, until the synagogue's roof started to leak and Bradford's Muslim community stepped in as a surprise donor for the repairs.

"It was a true mitzvah," says Rudi Leavor, the 87-year-old chairman of the synagogue, of the gift from the Muslim community.

Built in 1880 by Rabbi Joseph Strauss, one of the first Reform rabbis in England, Bradford's synagogue features Sephardi-influenced Moorish architecture.

Bradford's Jewish population has been dwindling for decades, and took a serious hit during the economic crisis of the 1980s. When the roof of the synagogue started leaking, the congregation counted just 40 families and was facing possible closure.

The city's Orthodox synagogue, which was also founded in the late 19th century, had closed its doors in 2011 after routinely coming up short on its requisite 10-man quorum for prayer. Compared to the 25,000-person strong Jewish community in nearby Leeds, Bradford's Jews seemed orphaned and adrift.

Leavor says that the congregation was considering selling the building out of desperation, but enough members were opposed to that idea that they scrapped it. Instead, a new Friends of the Synagogue organization was founded, offering concerned citizens – both Jews and non-Jews alike – membership for 60 GBP a year. In turn, they received invitations to social events at Hanukkah and on other festive occasions.

Donations trickled in, but not as fast as the water from the leaky roof. Things looked very dire for the Bradford Synagogue until some concerned neighbors intervened.

Zulfi Karim, the 47-year-old secretary of the Bradford Council of Mosques, was at Friday prayers when he heard of the synagogue's plight. The news came to him thanks to a local Pakistani restaurant called Sweet

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From left to right: Zulfi Karim, Michele Sutton, Rudi Leavor, and Khalid Pervaiz. Photo by Courtesy

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Rudi Leavor. Photo by courtesy

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Centre, which sits close to both the synagogue and the mosque.

The restaurant was so popular with some of the synagogue's congregants for a Saturday lunch that they had joined forces with the restaurant's owner to lobby against the conversion of a nearby building into a rival eatery. So when Sweet Centre's owner got wind of the synagogue's financial woes, he referred Leavor to a local South Asian merchant's association, which gifted GBP 500 toward repairs. And it was through this connection that Leavor met Mahmood Mohammed, a development officer for Bradford council, who in turn got in touch with Karim.

"I was shocked to hear the news," says Karim, who was born and raised a few hundred yards from the Bradford Reform Synagogue," and I immediately reached out to others in the Muslim community."

Within a few days, the community had raised GBP 2,000 for emergency repairs – 1,000 from a variety of individuals, and 1,000 matched by a donor who at first asked to remain anonymous.

Eventually Leavor discovered the donor was Khalid Pervaiz, the new owner of a textile factory near the synagogue. That same factory had previously belonged to the Strauss family, who were descendents of Bradford's first Reform Rabbi.

"We have so much in common," says Karim of the two Bradford communities. "We both have a tradition of helping each other out in business, and strong entrepreneurial, family and community values." He also acknowledges that in addition to their common Abrahamic ancestry, there are parallels between the anti-Semitism and Islamophobia both communities have endured.

But in the end, it was Karim's personal relationship with Leavor that helped connect the two communities.

"When I met Rudi, I felt like he was my father, or grandfather," Karim says. "If he were an elder in my community, I would be there for him in his time of need. So I felt – well, it's my obligation to help him as if he were a member of my own family."

Soon after the two met in March, Leavor made his first-ever visit to the mosque, and Karim entered the synagogue for the first time.

For his part, Leavor says, "I was certainly chuffed to have experienced such generosity, especially at this stage in my life. I've been the synagogue secretary since 1953, and this is the biggest thing that's ever happened to us. It was a very pleasant surprise."

With the roof repair now complete, Leavor has applied for longer term funding from the National Lottery Corporation to bring the building up to code, but he is uncertain if the GBP 100,000 pounds required will be forthcoming.

But plans are afoot for more community building exercises. To kick off the annual Bradford World Curry Festival in June, special interfaith meals are being arranged at the mosque, the synagogue, and at St. Paul's, a local Anglican church.

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“Food brings people together,” says Karim, who is currently consulting with local kosher and halal chefs about the cross-cultural meals. Meanwhile a typical English high tea – complete with cucumber sandwiches – is planned for St. Paul’s.

“Chicken tikka masala is my favorite dish,” says Leavor, although he confesses he often skips the Sweet Centre in favour of his wife’s chicken soup. “There’s nothing like home cooking,” he says.

Both men hope that Bradford’s example can be a catalyst for other Jewish and Muslim communities, in the U.K. and around the globe.

“Our story represents a small window of hope,” says Karim.

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