

SZIM SALOM – BRIDGE TOWARDS SPIRITUALITY

Sim Shalom is Hungary's first progressive Jewish congregation and the only congregation with a female rabbi as its religious leader. They hold Shabbat and holiday service, organize community and cultural programs, and those interested can participate in their educational programs. All their events are held in a diverse, inclusive, caring environment.

The story of *Sim Shalom* started approximately thirty years ago. It all began with a chance encounter when one Friday evening in the 1980s two assimilated young people participated in the Rabbinical Seminary's Kiddush led by professor rabbi Sándor Scheiber. That evening the eventual founders of *Sim Shalom* were approached by Valerie and Ernest Bello, a well-respected couple of the progressive community of London. The Bellos were active members of West London synagogue. They got into a discussion and thus laid down – without knowing about it - the foundations of the first Hungarian progressive congregation since the Second World War. Due to the rather liberal atmosphere, which even carried the idea of freedom, before the democratic transition, young people were driven by their thirst for knowledge, the possibility to learn about their traditions and roots. At the same time, they were attracted to the open-mindedness of the English liberal Jewry. Not long after they held their first joint Seder dinner, which evoked the spirit of the lost extended family.

The first Jewish holiday experience of this informal group of friends was followed by other rabbinical visits from London, which eventually culminated in a month long course about the spiritual basics of Judaism held by the most prominent professors of Leo Baeck College. The new community was grateful for the support of rabbi Fred Morgan, a former professor himself at LBC, who also came over and helped with community development for three months. The community formed an association in October 1992, and from 2004 it also functioned as a recognized church in Hungary for a few years. It did not take long for *Sim Shalom* to produce its own rabbi: Katalin Kelemen, one of its founding members and still the only female rabbi in the country, became its religious leader. Katalin was born into an assimilated family. She finished her studies at Leo Baeck College of London where she became ordained as a rabbi in 1998. As a second generation Holocaust survivor, she took it upon herself to be the spiritual leader of a community that by leaving the shame and the role of the victim behind, focuses on experiencing Judaism in a positive, happy way. Although as a female rabbi she has had her

challenges to be accepted as a religious leader, she has helped to raise two generations in *Sim Shalom*. She and her coworkers – who are members of the community and her friends - are to be thanked for the creation of the first Hungarian progressive prayer books as well as such educational materials.

Everybody in their way

The progressive denomination is the most populous branch of Judaism today. Its umbrella organization, the World Union for Progressive Judaism – of which *Sim Shalom* is a member – has 1.7 million members in 1200 communities worldwide. *Sim Shalom*, like all progressive communities, considers Jewish tradition a living, ever changing and developing progress of teaching and practice. Jewish tradition, in their opinion, has never been completely uniformed or perfectly consistent due to the fact that it takes advantage of the experience of successive generations as well as the influence of the different cultures and thus passes on knowledge. Representatives of the denomination also think that halakhah (*the laws and practices from which rabbinical Jewish religion developed*) can be further considered. They emphasize that some of the 613 commandments were valid in a certain historical age. Obviously, this does not mean that we should not learn halakhic tradition. However, they add, everybody should proceed in their own individual pace in their own religious development. At the same time, the progressive denomination does not consider itself the one and only legitimate representative of the Jewry: its guidance for Jewish life and liturgy is one possible interpretation of the traditional Jewish principles and liturgy. Moreover, it also aims to have a continuous dialogue or partnership with the representatives of the other denominations.

Friendly and inclusive

As a result of the above, *Sim Shalom* is an inclusive community. It is important for its members that all women, men, and members of the LGBTQI community participate in religious life with equal rights and dignity. Therefore, during service women and men sit together. Those who are not familiar with Jewish liturgy or never received Jewish education are also to *Sim Shalom*. ‘We know of people who live a Jewish life, have a Jewish identity, but they are not welcome to a traditional community. They can feel like home at *Sim Shalom*’, says Dóra Rozgonyi, a board member. This is due to the fact that while according to the law in rabbinical Judaism, only those whose mother is Jewish are considered Jewish, in *Sim Shalom* they also recognize the ancient biblical principle of patrilineal descent. They welcome

everyone who is interested in progressive Judaism regardless of their descent and religion to their programs. ‘We receive unselfish love and acceptance here. We learn a lot from each other. Therefore, it is really like a real family; something I have never experienced’, says a member of the community describing why *Sim Shalom* means so much to her. Another member adds: ‘*Sim Shalom* is an opportunity for me to experience religion. At the same time for those generations who grew up with no religion it is an inspiring source of information to learn about religion, culture, and traditions.’

‘It is important for us to be able to show that Judaism can be based on a positive experience in religion’, says Gergely Guba, president of *Sim Shalom*, describing one of the main missions of the organization.

In spite of all the difficulties

Sim Shalom’s engines have been its volunteers since the very beginning; the people who either after work or in addition to their family life and other responsibilities deal with the community and handle the related tasks. We need them more than ever since the church law of 2011 deprived *Sim Shalom*, among other religious communities, of its recognized legal status. As a result of this change, they lost the opportunity to collect the voluntary 1% income tax. Due to this fact, they could not afford to maintain their synagogue and were forced to get rid of it. Currently, they hold their religious services and programs at the generous Balint Jewish Community Center while Mozaik Hub contributes to its community development.

An intellectual environment

People who are interested in *Sim Shalom* can participate along with members of the organization in Shabbat and other holiday services, Seder dinner, liturgy courses, Torah learning sessions, or learning sessions about the Jewish holidays.

Philanthropy and social responsibility are also important topics within the organization is. *Sim Shalom* has participated several times in interfaith food distribution events organized by Hungarian Krishna worshippers, has held its cookie auction to raise money for the Hungarian Hospice Foundation, and cooperated with Migszol of Szeged (Migrant Solidarity Group) to provide food and clothing for refugees. Apart from this, together with the other two egalitarian communities, Beth Orim and Dor Hadas, they hold an annual LGBTQI friendly

service. Moreover, for the first time this year, they participated as a community in the Budapest Pride march with their own flag. In 2016, again with the two other egalitarian communities, they held a refugee solidarity service, where representatives of other religions, a refugee, and an activist gave speeches.

The congregation has several programs for children and many people from outside the community attend rabbi Katalin Kelemen's workshops on Judaism for adults. 'In Bet Midras, or the house of learning, even those who have no previous experience can have a peek into Judaism; and those with experience can also find intellectual challenges', says Dóra Rozgonyi. 'Many people find their way to experience religious community feeling through this program as there is a group within the Jewry of Budapest that is more interested in cultural events. With these programs, we manage to build a bridge towards spirituality', adds Gergely Guba. The way a permanent participant put it: 'Way back when I was drawn to the intellectual environment I did not find anywhere else. Our learning sessions, discussions, and our ability to learn from and about each other.'