



Yedidya Levin

## Letters for Eternity

One of the hundreds of outdoor *minyanim* that popped up all over the world in response to the coronavirus was on Nachal Maor Street in Ramat Beit Shemesh, where neighbors gathered to *daven* in the parking lot.

Dr. Moshe Pinchuk, director of the Jewish Heritage Center at Netanya Academic College, was one of the *minyan* attendees. He noticed two metal plaques on the *atzei chayim* of the *sefer Torah* they were using, which stated that the scroll had been donated to the Harrogate Hebrew Congregation by Mr. John Levi in honor of his son Harry, who was killed in action during World War I.

Curious about the circumstances that led to this *sefer Torah* still being in use over a century later, Dr. Pinchuk began researching the Jewish soldier and uncovered a fascinating tale.

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Harry Levi was born in Manchester, England, in 1890, the youngest of John and Sophia Levi's ten children. A bright and friendly lad, he studied at the Manchester Grammar School and then at Cambridge, where he got his law degree. He began practicing as a solicitor in 1911, and he served on the boards of various Jewish organizations.

In 1914, the First World War broke out. Britain entered the fray that August, to prevent a French defeat that would have left Germany in control of Western Europe. Thousands of men joined the armed forces, and the Anglo-Jewish community pushed its members to do so as well, thereby show-



**Harry Levi with his father John after enlisting in the British Armed Forces**  
(Credit: Derek Wax)

ing gratitude to the country that had welcomed masses of Jewish immigrants in the past.

Two years into the war, 26-year-old Harry decided to enlist, joining another astounding 50,000 Jewish conscripts—out of a total population of around 300,000! A newspaper article about the May 1916 meeting of the Manchester Talmud Torah, where Levi served on the board, reported that “The best wishes of the Institution were extended to Mr. Harry Levi, Hon. Solicitor, on his impending departure for military service.”

In the summer of 1917, Levi was sent to France. That winter, he took part in the Battle of Cambrai, a British assault on the German Army near the town of Cambrai, France, which resulted in a massive German counterattack. In the course of the battle, which raged from November 20 to December 7, some 10,000 British soldiers and 9,000 Germans were killed, with tens of thousands more injured.

Sadly, Harry Levi was one of those casualties, dying in battle on November 30 (15 Kislev). His death was reported in the newspapers back home, and tributes praised him as a cheerful and talented attorney and engaged member of the community.

“It is with a heavy heart,” wrote his friend to the *Jewish Chronicle*, “that I pen the obituary of my dear friend 2nd Lieut. Harry Levi, who

has been reported killed and will be sorely missed in all circles. To those who knew him intimately, his



**A British tank ditched in a German trench during the Battle of Cambrai**

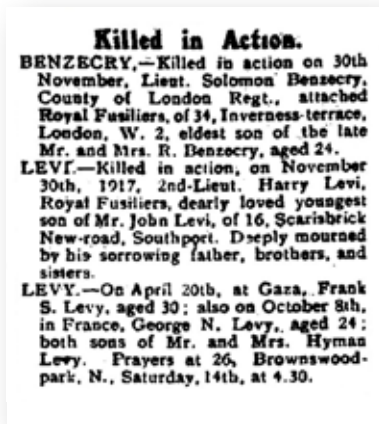
marvelously cheerful disposition, excellent comradeship and font of humor cannot be replaced.”

The obituary said that Harry was “an able advocate and brilliant speaker,” who “also took a keen interest in Jewish affairs, being a manager of the Grove House Lads’ Club, a member of the Council of the Higher Broughton Synagogue, and prominently connected with other Jewish institutions.”

In a letter to the grieving family, Harry’s commander wrote, “He was quite one of the best officers in the battalion and very keen on his work.”

A few weeks later, the *Jewish Chronicle* printed a letter it had received from Harry Levi, written on November 29, only a day before his death:

*“It fell to my lot in most peculiar circumstances to be concerned in the burial of two of my fellow Jews who fell in the recent Cambrai battle. My C.O. sent for me and informed me of the fact that two members of my*



Harry Levi’s name among a list of fallen Jewish soldiers

*faith had just been buried in the cemetery, hastily fixed up after the action, and also that our padre would like a Jewish officer to recite the burial service over their graves.*

*“I very naturally acceded to the request and read the service over the graves of 2nd Lieut. Cohen of the Royal Sussex Regt. and Lance-Corpl. Jacobson of the Middlesex...*

*“I don’t happen to have the name and address of the next-of-kin of either of the two brave men who made the highest sacrifice. I therefore take the opportunity of acquainting you with the facts so that you may be able to get into communication with them.”*

The two soldiers Levi mentioned were Dudley (David) Cohen and Harris Jacobson, who both fell in battle on November 20, 1917. In the former’s case, Harry’s letter was even more important, since Cohen had been married when he was killed.

After his son’s death, John Levi gave generous donations to various causes in memory of his son—which brings us to our story. In April 1919, Mr. Levi commissioned the writing of a *sefer Torah* in memory of Harry and donated it to a newly-founded Orthodox *shul* in Harrogate, England.

In the 2010s, the Morris/Rakusen family of Harrogate exchanged a small, lightweight *sefer Torah* they owned for the *shul*’s larger one donated by Mr. Levi.

The scroll was lent to various *shuls* in Israel, but when COVID-19 struck, the Morrises, who live in Ramat Beit Shemesh, used it for their street *minyan*, where it is still being read every Shabbos. A few weeks ago, the *minyan* marked the 104th *yahrtzeit* of Harry Levi’s death in action in the First World War by reciting *Kaddish*, *Keil Malei Rachamim*, and arranging a commemorative *kiddush*.

Was it perhaps the merit of the *chesed shel emes* Harry Levi had performed with the fallen Jewish soldiers that ensured the perpetuation of his memory all these decades later? □

CREDIT: DR. MOSHE PINCHUK



Although the *sefer Torah*’s mantle was worn out and had to be placed in *genizah*, its *atzei chayim* still tell the tale.