

***Kol Nidrei 5780***

Gmar chatima tova – a gut gebensht yor to all

There is a shul in Berlin that was formally inaugurated as the Great Synagogue but is almost universally called the Neu Synagogue, the new shul in Oranienberger Strasse. New by European standards, it was completed in 1866 as the Jewish population in Berlin shifted, with large numbers of Jews moving to Germany from Eastern Europe, especially Poland. The synagogue could accommodate more than 3000 congregants – and it became a centre of the liberalising movement in nineteenth and early twentieth century German Jewish life.

The physical building survived Kristallnacht but was badly damaged during the war and in 1958 much of the shul was demolished by the poorly resourced East Berlin Jewish community as it was considered to be beyond saving. After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, some work was done to partially restore the building and a small room of the original building is now home to Berlin's only Masorti community.

Most of the remaining building is a museum about Jewish life in that neighbourhood before the war and in that museum is a deeply moving film made in 1932 of the synagogue's women's choir singing Psalm 130 - to the traditional melody of Kol Nidrei, practising for the High Holidays. The psalm they recorded begins with the words 'Min Hama' akamim', 'From the depths of my despair', and is sung responsively through the month of Elul and on the yamim noraim. The choir recorded the psalm sung in German in an arrangement by Louis Lewandowski who had been the choir master of the synagogue and whose cantorial arrangements are considered to be the backbone of modern synagogue music all over the world.

We can imagine the big deal that went into filming a choir's performance in 1932, the planning, the preparation, the excitement, the hairstyles, the worry about dresses. And the result is a rare and poignant archive that captures an intensely punctuated moment. Listening to the familiar melody of Kol Nidrei set to the words of despair and heartache in the place in which it was recorded was deeply moving – I listened again and again, tears streaming down my cheeks.

It's unlikely that the women in that choir had any real inkling of what lay ahead. Most would have been German citizens, spoken German, and had German neighbours and friends. Perhaps they had forebodings about the trajectory of German politics but it is unlikely they had any idea that within months of that recording, Jewish life in Berlin would be so fully changed. Less than six months after the Yom Kippur of 1932, Jewish businesses would be boycotted in Berlin and three years later the Nuremberg laws would come into force making Jews into less than second class citizens. The women whose voices now sing to museum visitors could not have possibly have imagined that within ten years of that day there would be no Jews in Berlin.

Part of the haunting sadness of this film for me was about the disruption to that progressive note in Jewish life. Even as the safety of Jews was under threat, changes in Jewish Berlin continued until Nazis came to power and put an end first to organised Jewish life and then any Jewish life. In 1935 Regina Jonas became the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi under the auspices of the Neu Shul. Rabbi Jonas was deported to Theresienstadt in 1942 where she taught and for two years counselled her people especially new arrivals as they tried to make sense of their new surroundings, until she was transported to Auschwitz, where she was murdered in 1944.

Post war, the focus was different - on rebuilding of lives and communities, and it would be 40 years before another woman was ordained - Rabbi Sally Priesand in the reform movement in 1972, then Rabbi Amy Eilberg in 1984 in the conservative movement and then 25 years later Rabba Sara Hurwitz in 2009 as the first ordained woman in the orthodox world. Watching the film, I was awash in sadness about the tragic loss of Jewish life and community of course, but also a sense of loss TO Jewish life - sadness about what perhaps could have evolved – where we might be.

It's impossible to respond to those beautiful voices singing in High German about the depths of despair without being affected by the knowledge that they didn't have, of the brutality and devastation that would follow, even as we know that the women singing probably enjoyed the performance, and that the despair, the pleas for help from their maker was being referenced as ritual rather than as an immediate expression of terror. **They were rehearsing for the rehearsal that is Yom Kippur.**

Because Yom Kippur is rehearsal; it is communal theatre. The day is often described as a death rehearsal – the fasting, the asceticism take us out of our bodies, to imitate death and see our mortality. Our tradition is harsh and holy as it reminds us again and again that we come from dust and end in dust, so that we can truly feel the need to do the work of repair and change.

We are pushed to feel rather than think of our humble origins, the inevitable end that we will each meet and of the steep price of failing to fix ourselves and our relationships while there is still time.

This theatre ritual requires us to leave our homes, to come together as we create and find meaning through metaphor and narrative in the script that is the mahzor. We bring out the Sifrei Torah in a parade, we dress in flowing white, and in many old school Anglo synagogues on Kol Nidrei clergy still wear canonicals. There are still shuls in Europe where on Kol Nidrei the shul is lit entirely by candle light – It is indeed no less than holy musical theatre.

In this, our tradition gives us a beautiful opportunity; and it can be equally powerful for people of deep faith and for the many of us who struggle to hold onto belief.

**For those for whom belief is shakier, more elusive, the drama helps to suspend disbelief, and to accept the burden and privilege of living one day in the shadow of judgment, one day of self-accounting, one day that is indeed a matter of life and death.**

And it occurs to me thinking about drama that if Yom Kippur was a movie it would be directed by the Coen brothers. Yom Kippur takes us to chaotic landscapes – think snowed in Fargo where mid-western manners are useless against lurking and chaotic evil. Or A Serious Man where the orderly foot paths and lawns of a Minnesotan suburb become a landscape of loss and bewilderment - 'What has happened to my life, how is this happening to me'.

The screenplay that is the mahzor has no clear answers for why we experience life as random and no clear promises that that we can influence that. God's judgment is beyond comprehension, and the effect is that we experience a world not so different from the one in Ethan Coen's words "where nihilism and humility fight for the limited space beneath the god like umbrella of randomness. You may do good and win, or lose. You may do bad and walk

into the sunset ...or get thrown in to a wood chipper. You just never know. The point is that the world is a disgusting cesspool of beauty and pain and love and hate and murders and grown men wearing jellies. It's completely horrible and completely wonderful all at once".

But the choreography of the mahzor also dances us to the way in **WE** – and not just the world – are unworthy. The confessions include every category of human nastiness, inadequacy, greed, dishonesty, and 'catch all' failure and I think we get that almost too easily. Seeing the worst of ourselves isn't difficult for most of us - sadly we are quick to judge ourselves and others around us harshly, quick to feel disappointment with ourselves and too often quick to be disappointed by others.

So it's not hard to find your oy. Right now, we're also politically anxious and angry. Public discourse has never been less civil – full of anger, and insult and an apparent inability in all of us to listen to views we don't like. Our beloved Israel has become a source of conflict among Jews and in Israel itself – there are deep divisions on how to reach a just peace with the Palestinians, disagreements on attitudes to security, harsh and ongoing social and religious battles. We have collectively failed to protect our children from abuse and to hold abusers to account. In the last year Jews in the US were murdered while praying in shul - and over all of this is the entirely rational terror of Climate Crisis – and our collective failure to do anything meaningful to arrest it.

I read this week that the great American Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Yitzhok Hutner used to say that "A machzor without tear stains is like a haggada without wine stains – you can tell that it hasn't been used properly. Facing into anger, shame, fear and sadness right now is not that hard. If you're not crying this Yom Kippur you're not paying attention.

But it's much harder to know what to do with the fear and the tears. If the holiness of this day is that it pushes us to commit to living better lives, to what we will do differently, we also need a bit of a holy steer about how to do that.

That's when this gets really hard. Yom Kippur gives us the urgency, the impetus and energy to do better, to be better but how we do this is a year long, a life long endeavour.

We know and if we didn't, the mahzor reminds us, that good deeds, a life well lived are no guarantee of anything. How do we live with the knowledge that what we do really matters, shapes our lives, our world - until it doesn't?

I don't have easy answers but I will share two different inspirations.

Almost exactly a year ago in response to the horrifying murder of Jews on a Shabbat morning in a shul in Pittsburgh my friend and teacher Raf Dascalu shared this beautiful Torah that I have carried this past year as a balm for some of my fears and griefs. He wrote:

*In a specifically Jewish context, my own perspective is that the only resistance that matters is spiritual resistance. The Torah teaches that every human being is a representation of the Divine. According to the Mishnah, the Divine suffers viscerally and cries out even when a wicked person is justly put to death. Humans are entrusted with the world to safeguard it and cultivate it. ... we are commanded to sanctify ourselves and strive to live holy lives, and to constantly seek and return to the Divine. So my response is to try to live as Jewishly as I can, as well as I can, as compassionately as I can.*

*Put in Kabbalistic terms: When the aspect of the Divine that dominates the world is constrictive, reactive, punishing - that is precisely the time that we must align with the expansive, the compassionate, the selflessly nourishing aspect of the Divine. When the world tends towards severity, we must embody divine love.*

*So this is the response ... that I'm aiming for: Jew it up, with a big heart, with devotion. Aim for holiness and love. And keep doing that till we drop.*

**So - Jew it up and keep doing that until we drop.**

The doing matters. The Jewing matters.

In choosing a life where doing matters, choosing to believe that the direction of our lives depends on how we live, what choices we make, we also need a place, a way to live in that choice.

We need courage and kindness – chesed - as we carry that responsibility.

We need wisdom, Torah, as we navigate imperfect solutions, and deal with inevitable disappointments and failures.

And we need beauty and sanctuary, tefilla, song, even theatre to help us bear the burden of building lives in the face of uncertainty.

I began with a heartbreaking memory of liturgy as theatre and I want to end by taking us to a different kind of theatre, the joyfully performative moment we will share tomorrow during musaf of the Seder ha'avoda, when we re-enact the the service of atonement conducted by the Cohen HaGadol the High priest to cleanse the community of all sin, as it took place in the Temple, in accordance with instructions in the book of Vayikra.

Temple services, sending a scapegoat out into the desert carrying our sins, are no longer in our play book and I suspect for most of us that's OK, but it's part of our story. It's a collective memory, and tomorrow in the high noon of Yom Kippur we will recreate the scene in dramatic and poetic detail here in this bridge club turned synagogue turned stage, in a piece of theatre which enables us to live a deep Jewish memory if only for a few minutes.

It's a memory that has been given new life by a song released only weeks ago by an Israeli musician Yishay Ribo re-telling the service in a sort of pop song /prayer/ poem which has been viewed on youtube millions of times in a matter of weeks - and we'll read his lyrics tomorrow during the service.

I am inspired by the regeneration I see in the work of this young artist – how speaking Hebrew as a living language has enabled Ribo to create beautiful poetry accompanied by equally beautiful music to give the ritual new life, and to make it accessible for a new generation.

Ribo's song helps us see in the seder Ha'avodah its collective focus and its joy – the hope it offers as we sing of the splendour of the High priest as he left the holy of Holies unharmed, having fulfilled his responsibilities to atone for the community.

I see in myself, my own family, among my friends, in people in this dear beloved kehilla, much heartache and difficulty – disappointment and uncertainty, longings, losses, burdens, loneliness and fear.

Yom Kippur can all too easily become a day where each of us retreats inside of ourselves but Ribo's beautiful rendition of Seder Ha'avoda, the service itself, is a reminder that the mahzor also shepherds us to come together as a community, that redemption is possible.

The service ends with communal joy:

Ashrei Ha'am she adonai elohav

Happy are the people whose God is Adonai

And Ribo sings in the key of our goodness:

Ve im adam yachol likzor et ha chasidim et hatovot et kol ha rachamim et kol hayeshuot

If a person could but remember the many kindnesses and all the good, and the many mercies and the many crises resolved.

Because this too is the theatre of Yom Kippur

We sing in the collective and we sing of goodness, and mercy and resolution.

We are reminded that as a community we can lift each other in song, in friendship. We can inspire each other to live good and purposeful lives of kindness, connection and compassion. We can share our joy and we can stand alongside each other through loss and as we face our fears and do the doing and the Jewing that this day, that this life requires.

Mandi Katz

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### ***Inspirations***

The mahzor

Raf Dascalu for Monday night mishnayos and the best conversations, as well as the words I borrowed

Ishay Ribo – *Seder Ha'avoda* and many facebook posts, blogs and comments about the song which I can't recall in an organised way, but which were wonderful to read as I listened again and again.

David Hartman – *The God who hates lies*

Joseph B Soloveitchik – *The Lonely Man of Faith*