



Kehillah
NORTH LONDON

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Charity No. 1163562

SHANA TOVA

שנה טובה

HAPPY NEW YEAR

Foreword from our Spiritual Leader, Cantor Tamara

“Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem lifnei Adonai eloheichem...”

“You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God...”

This verse begins our Torah reading on Yom Kippur morning, and as I was re-learning how to chant it (in British High Holy Day trope, no less!) I couldn't help but reflect on these words. The imagery really hit home: every single member of every tribe — thousands of people — assembled before God and Moses.

The Torah frequently describes circumstances that could prevent people from participating in certain rites and rituals. But this time, not a single person was excluded from the gathering. The passage continues, “...your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from wood-chopper to water-drawer — to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God...”

These verses give us a clear picture of the people that made up the community of our Israelite ancestors: young and old, men and women, tribal heads and strangers. *Even* the stranger, the text emphasizes, can enter into the covenant. Here, there is no gatekeeping. And any person that counts themselves among the Israelites in the moment can take upon themselves the covenant of God.

I believe that the radical inclusivity and acceptance we see in these verses is a mirror in which we might recognise our own Kehillah's ethos. We are similar in so many ways to our Biblical ancestors: well-seasoned in our wanderings, comfortable adapting to temporary dwelling-places, aware of our history and our story, and ever-changing as families and generations come and go. As we keep our rich traditions alive, we also recognise the role that innovation plays in keeping our community thriving.

And who is our Kehillah? Who are the people that stand together before God on the first and third Saturdays of each month? We are men, women, parents, children, teachers, students, friends, strangers, and everything in between. We may come from right around the corner, or we might make the long trek on multiple trains and buses. We might come twice a month, or we might come twice a year. Maybe we're observing *yahrzeits* or celebrating B'nai Mitzvah. Maybe we've come to accompany our children to cheder. Maybe we've come seeking companionship. Maybe we've come to be alone with God or with our thoughts. Whatever the reason and wherever we gather, we create a sacred space together and show up for one another. This is what makes us a *kehillah kedosha*: a holy community in covenant with one another.

As we stand together in the lead-up to the High Holy Days, I encourage us to think about how we can honour our community covenant this year — no matter who you are, where you live, or how frequently you come to shul (I never judge, so don't worry!) Whether we volunteer in the cheder, bring food for a kiddush, show up for a shiva, or simply introduce ourselves to an unfamiliar face, there are small sacred ways we can add our gifts to the community.

May we all be inspired by our community and its many gifts this year, and may we feel strengthened by its many members — “from wood-chopper to water-drawer” — that make us who we are.

Extinction rebellion, Joss Goldstein

Shavuot commemorates the time when God gave the Torah to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai more than 3000 years ago. Many people celebrate by staying up all night, studying the Torah. Of course, there is a food element to Shavuot too and we often eat blintzes, cheesecake and other dairy foods, partly because the Torah is considered nourishing 'like milk'.

At Kehillah, we like to spend Shavuot talking about issues and ideas that matter to the community. This year, Cath Goldstein led a session on active listening. Her daughter Joss Goldstein, 12, then told us about why she has become a climate change activist and member of Extinction Rebellion. This is what Joss said:

“Extinction Rebellion is a non-violent movement, fighting for the government to tell the truth about the climate and the ecological emergency we face. Our aim is to get to zero carbon emissions by 2025 in the UK. We disrupt and disobey because the government is moving slowly and we don't have much time left. The public also need to know what we want and when we want it, i.e. now.

I joined Extinction Rebellion because I couldn't just sit at school being bored, as the teacher droned on about the importance or not of wearing our coats indoors. I went to my first weekly meeting in April of this year. I was inspired by Greta Thunberg, the young Swedish activist. I went on the first youth strike and persuaded all my friends to come. It was such fun. I went on all the strikes after that. I am sure all of you have heard of the Rebellion in April. It was an amazing event and action. After that, I decided to go on strike for a week, missing all of school and doing fun XR things. Now I am a passionate activist doing everything I can to stop the planet burning up.

These are some of the things that Greta Thunberg has said that I find most inspiring.

“Change is coming whether you like it or not.”

“Act like your house is on fire.”

“No one is too small to make a difference.”

“If everyone does something, then huge differences can happen.”

Extinction Rebellion arouses strong feelings among young and old so, after describing her feelings, Joss took questions and opened up a really meaningful conversation about global warming and what each and every one of us can do to mitigate its impact.

Rosh Hashana reflections, Miriam Manon

Each year the arrival of the high holidays seems to catch me by surprise. Once again, the days are growing shorter and back to school preparations are in full swing. Like Jews everywhere, I am called to turn inward, to reflect on my actions of the past 12 months, take stock of where I stand in my relationships, and make amends where they are needed. I've always appreciated this enforced period of self-reflection and its communal nature. This year, however, I will be taking a slightly different approach, rooted in a spirit of *self-compassion*.

Over the past year, I've become aware of how quickly my inner dialogue can turn to self-criticism, how easily self-reflection can turn into another opportunity to beat myself up - for spending too much time on my phone, not being patient enough with my daughter, present enough with my partner, or engaged enough in the causes I believe in. From a young age, we are taught the importance of kindness to others; that it is cruel to berate people when they make a mistake or harshly judge those who fall short of our expectations. Yet, at the same time, I seem to find it difficult to bestow that same kindness to myself.

As I've read more about this subject, I've learned that I'm not the only one. We live in a highly-competitive, results-driven culture that values working hard and being best over caring for ourselves. This can lead to perfectionism and social-comparison and a tendency to dwell on our every mistake. Self-compassion instead calls on us to acknowledge the challenges we face, treat ourselves with kindness, and recognize that our imperfections make us human and connect us to those around us. Self-compassion is not about ignoring flaws or letting go of goals, but rather seeing ourselves as we are and holding space for our imperfections.

This, I've learned, is motivating rather than deflating. For example, instead of berating myself for spending too much time on my phone when I'm with my daughter - a strategy which has had little positive impact - I'm trying a new approach. First, I can acknowledge that spending all day with a 4-year-old is challenging, and that while I may not be a perfect mother, I'm doing my best to be present with my daughter. From this place of kindness, I'm better able to look at what I *really* need, perhaps a phone call to a friend to combat feelings of isolation or doing some yoga while my daughter plays, to recharge. While I still find myself mindlessly browsing social media at times, replacing shame with self-nourishment is far more productive for both myself and my family.

As we communally enter this period of *t'shuvah* (repentance) my hope is that we can do so with a spirit of kindness and compassion, towards ourselves as well as those around us.

*(And for those interested in reading more about this subject, I highly recommend the book *Self-Compassion* by Kristin Neff which inspired this column!)*

Going back to our roots, Robert Freudenthal

This year we will be using the Gallery at the Stoke Newington library for our Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur daytime services. This will have added meaning for us, as the Stoke Newington library has had a particular role in the history of Liberal Judaism.

In 1921, nineteen years after the founding of the JRU (Jewish Religious Union), which was the predecessor to Liberal Judaism, the first progressive Jewish services were held in Stoke Newington, at the Stoke Newington library. Prior to this, there was only one established community within the JRU - the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, now in St John's Wood.

The JRU had held some earlier meetings in Islington and Finsbury Park to attract interest to the organisation. But the meetings were not followed up. A group of dissatisfied members from an Orthodox community subsequently approached JRU to establish a new community in Stoke Newington. At that time, many Jewish people were moving from the East End of London to the area around Stoke Newington, as they sought a less urban and more residential space.

In 1921, the first Shabbat service was duly held at the Stoke Newington library. Reports suggest that attendance was much higher than expected, with as many as 300 people coming to services. These appear to have been lively events. Arguments broke out, heckling erupted and some people were even asked to leave.

This community subsequently evolved into the North London Progressive Synagogue, which closed in 2002. Shortly after that some of its members, along with others, founded Kehillah North London.

Whilst Stoke Newington, its library, and the Jewish community in this area has undergone huge changes over the last century in multiple ways, it might be helpful when we meet for the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services to think about how far we have come, but also how much we might have in common with those three hundred Jews who turned up to the Stoke Newington library ninety-nine years ago, curious about what a progressive approach to Judaism might be like. Hopefully our services will be just as lively and exciting – without the heckling of course!

Historical information from 'Liberal Judaism: the First Hundred Years' by Lawrence Rigal and Rosita Rosenberg

A day of celebration, Jackie Richards

On 23rd June 2019, more than 180 Progressive Jews came together to discuss care, community and social justice at the Liberal Judaism Day of Celebration. It was an opportunity to meet members from other communities and learn together. This year the theme was: 'If I am only for myself'. It focused on how to meet the desire and need to care for oneself, the congregation and wider society, with limited resources. Members from 27 Liberal and two Reform communities attended, including Cantor Tamara and myself.

The opening keynote conversation was between Labour MP Dame Margaret Hodge and Jean Gaffin OBE, a distinguished figure within British healthcare. They discussed intergenerational inequality, their pioneering work in care and the importance of having women in leadership positions. Margaret Hodge also recounted her battles with racists in the BNP and her views about antisemitism in the Labour Party. There were 19 workshop sessions during the day, covering topics including teenage mental health, social work, death and mourning, the experiences of carers, including those with additional needs, and creating a volunteer culture. There were also singing and dancing workshops and a parallel programme of LJY-Netzer youth activities, including art, games and a 'Kindness Olympics.'

I led a dancing workshop. The aim was to give participants several expressive dance opportunities using different music, so that they could enjoy dancing, increase their own self-awareness, connect with others and experience more flow and spirituality. We also used different Mussar soul-traits to create group shapes and ended with some classic Chassidic dancing, celebratory Klezmer dancing and a restful winddown. By the end of the sessions, everyone said they had really moved, enjoyed what they had done and felt connected to everyone who had participated.

Hopefully, they will be able to take ideas back to their communities or at the very least think about incorporating more dance into their own lives. Other sessions were presented by Liberal rabbis and leaders, as well as representatives from the Israeli Embassy, Limmud, Citizens UK, Norwood, Jewish Care, Jami, JVN and the Paperweight Trust.

Liberal Judaism's director of strategy and partnerships Rabbi Charley Baginsky said: "There is perhaps no greater area of concern within our congregations than that of how we care for our members and how we can use our positive influence on the wider community."

The Day of Celebration concluded with the graduation of the latest cohort from Liberal Judaism's Ba'alei Tefillah lay leadership programme, the announcement of the winners of the LAFTAs competition for short films on Judaism made by Liberal religion schools and a performance from some of the session leaders from the Day of Music, held the previous day at Northwood & Pinner Liberal Synagogue. This included Cantor Tamara, who sang beautifully.

I hope some more members of Kehillah North London will come along to the next Day of Celebration. I am sure it will be insightful and enjoyable, benefiting themselves and helping Kehillah to develop and become even more receptive to issues within and beyond our community.

Coping with loss, Cantor Tamara

Our tradition tells us that “kol Yisrael aravim zeh ba’zeh” — all of Israel are responsible for one another — and we model this in the ways we show up for one another in times of need. This year, our members have unfortunately suffered an unprecedented number of bereavements. Such a period of loss has made me think about the ways that we can better support members who have recently been bereaved. Based on fruitful conversations with some of them, I’m collecting reflections here to hopefully springboard an ongoing conversation.

There are many ways to support people after a bereavement. Being physically present at a funeral or shiva goes a long way towards helping mourners feel less alone. However, there are other ways we can be present for mourners. For people who are suffering a bereavement for the first time, the practicalities after a death can be daunting. Accompanying someone to the hospital to register a death or retrieve their loved ones’ belongings can be an invaluable source of support during a difficult and confusing time. Additionally, people who have gone through this before can guide those who may be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of logistics that come with a loss.

Often, families are our most immediate source of companionship after a death. But these relationships can be complicated, so it is even more important for synagogue communities to be emotionally available. Sometimes people may appreciate someone sitting down and asking about their loved ones. Other times, people might want to talk about anything except the bereavement. Either way, having a non-familial support system can allow the mourner to process and grieve differently.

Finally and most importantly: grief is highly personal. What worked for you may not work for others, so it is important to be able to put aside your own experiences and be open to the differing needs of others. Some people need to talk about their grief with others, while other people need distractions and prefer to grieve alone. Additionally, people often find it hard to articulate what they need. With all of this in mind, I would encourage us all to think a little differently about how we can support each other during difficult losses.

Sources of bereavement support:

Your general practitioner

Cruse Bereavement Care:

0808 808 1677

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/>

Jewish Bereavement Counselling Service:

0208 951 3881

<http://jbcs.org.uk/>

End note from the Chair, by Robin Samson

A year or more ago I started noticing people in our Kehillah making more and deeper connections with each other. New friendships which weren't there before; animated conversations after services between people I hadn't seen linking up before; people going out of their way to get hold of someone who had been ill, or having a rough time, or just hadn't joined us in a while. I've speculated about the possible reasons for this, but in the end, the most important thing is that it is happening – and I don't think I'm imagining it.

Noticing this reminded me that this is exactly what I belong to Kehillah for – a sense of belonging, of connecting with people: with other Jews, with the Jewish people as a whole, with people like me and people not like me. I imagine I'm not the only one who feels this way. Even if you don't identify with all of the above, maybe you recognise at least one of them...

And looking back, although I didn't realise it at the time, I think it also prompted me to try something different in our Management Committee meetings. We've had a couple of meetings where we did no 'business' and instead spent time thinking about how we might engage community members more.

In the process, we've got to know each other a little better. We've shared stories about what attracted us to Kehillah; how it was when we joined; what kept us coming back; what brought us to becoming members of the Committee and what we want for our Kehillah in the future. We talked about how we might foster deeper connection and harness more energy in the community.

Whether this has changed anything is not for me to say, but maybe it's not a coincidence that something seems to have shifted in the Committee about how we relate to each other as a group. I feel that I detect a renewed sense of purpose. Perhaps we talk to each other just a little bit differently. I'm pretty sure we've been at least slightly more proactive in going about the community tasks we take on.

What do you notice about relationships in our community? Do you see anything like what I think I see? I hope so. In these troubled times, let's move closer to each other and develop even more solidarity. After all, that's what communities are for... L'shanah tovah!

MAZEL TOV!!!

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