Kol Nidrei Sermon

On Rosh Hashana, I introduced the theme of my three major sermons of first and second day Rosh Hashana and tonight, Kol Nidrei night. I presented to you an age old dilemma, and old chestnut of a question – what defines us more – that we are individuals or that we are a community. Another way of putting this is – what came first...no, no not the chicken or the egg. What came first – us being individual separate people; or us being part of a group, a community.

My claim was that we are becoming more individualistic, more concerned with how we understand what we do. We are not willing to simply carry out commands that we do not agree with or simply do not understand. I made the point that this modern individualism is not totally a bad thing. But it does have consequences. I outlined two consequences over Rosh Hashana. Firstly, it as consequences for the knowledge we have of who we are. If we feel that the Torah is not relevant any more then it becomes left to the side and not learned. But the Torah is crucial to our identity – in fact the Torah gives us our identity. So we need to stop worry about levels of religiosity and worry more about how much we know of what is the Torah and the Tanach.

Secondly, I expressed my issues with the level of modesty today especially with our younger girls. Individualism has also become self expression and revealing of the body. This means more objectifying of girls and makes it more difficult for strong relationships to be built.

Today, I want to talk to you all seriously about a pressing topic – the family and its breakdown.

But first – as the band Coldplay once sang – ‘I’m Going back to the start’ – to the creation of Adam and Eve. If we look closely at their creation, we can see that there are many levels of creation and existence. In other words everyone, the creation of Adam and Eve in the Torah is not just a bed time story – it contains within it, core ideas of our very existence.

So for instance the Torah says the following:

‘Then the Lord formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils a breath of life and the man became a living being’

Here man is alone, totally and literally alone – not only is he alone physically – ie there was noone with Adam when God created him. But he is also what we would say ‘ontologically’ alone. In other words not only was there noone else with him, but there was not even the idea of another person. Total aloneness – total individualism. But then God says the following:

‘It is not good that the man should be alone – I will make a helpmate for him’

God had created man as an individual. But now God will in a sense re-form man as someone who has a relationship with another individual – with Eve.

‘And the rib which the Lord God has taken from the man made into a Woman and God brought her to the man’.

Adam was forced out of his absolute alone-ness and into a relationship.

According to Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik these texts show that Judaism cannot accept a one sided individualistic approach to life as well as totally collectivist approach. Neither should we accept a situation where our personal expression is suppressed; nor should we accept a situation where all that is right is what we say is right, rejecting an external communal opinion on what is right. In Rav Soloveitchik’s words:

‘Neither theory, per se, is true. Both experiences, that of aloneness as well of togetherness are inseparable basic elements of the I-awareness’

So our Jewish approach is that we do not need to choose between collectivism and individualism. But inside us all is the potential for both. In fact we will sometimes feel the urge to be alone, separate, not to connect, not to be with the other. And sometimes all we will want is to be in the presence of others and shed our difference for the sake of the relationship. In fact Rav Soloveitchik makes the point that the greatness of man is the contradiction he holds inside him or herself – both being single and not related to anyone – and yet being ‘you-related’ and belonging to a communal structure.

Now I am not demonising being individualistic. I am not saying it is wrong to express oneself. I am not saying it is wrong to be opinionated. I am not saying it is wrong to be loud. After all, I have just made it clear that a sense of being separate and considering your own approach to life, your own opinions is part of who we are – our original model, Adam was created as separate after all.

I am however more interested in the consequences of this approach and what happens if the pendulum that exists inside all of us, shifts towards individualism.

And today I want to look at the family and the great strain that it is under at the moment. Family breakdown is becoming more common in British society – in fact alarmingly so and our Jewish communities are certainly not immune from it.

In 2008, the Childrens Society commissioned a report on the state of the family and the challenges facing children called the Good Childhood Report. It found that 30% of children aged 16 do not live with their biological father. It found higher levels of childhood unhappiness. The report, which is well worth reading, looks at what it calls ‘excessive individualism’ as a root cause of many of the problems facing the family today. It defines this ‘excessive individualism’ as:

‘the belief that the prime duty of the individuals is to make the most of her own life rather than to contribute to the good of others...

The report continues:

‘The pursuit of personal success relative to others cannot create a happy society, since one persons success necessarily involves anothers failure’.

In a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report in 2008 into what they termed as social evils – one of these evils was defined as ‘individualism’.

But is it bad to be an individualist. Is it wrong to want to succeed? Is it wrong to want to express yourself…surely not. And so for instance a Professor of Philosophy from Birkbeck College wrote an article in September 2008 criticising the Rowntree foundation report. He felt that selfishness was not a new thing in society – and that in his words

‘Greater scope for individual expression and life possibilities is a positive thing’

And so individualism as pursuing one’s own goals is not at all inconsistent with relating to the other. We have many members of this community, women and men, who pursue a career, are successful and yet have families and do much for the community.

But what I am interested in is a deeper type of individualism, that echoes the very creation of Adam, the Torah’s very first individual. This is the individualism of not hearing the other. This is the individualism of not giving space for the other. This is the individualism of not tolerating and respecting the other’s difference. It is an individualism borne of our faster, louder, more confident and more opinionated lives.

When the Torah says ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ we sometimes miss something in the translation. We read in Hebrew ‘V’ahavta l’rayacha camocha’, which translates exactly to ‘Love your neighbour as much as you love yourself’. In other words, if we are much more interested in others listening to us, than listening to what others say, we are not taking the Torah’s sound advice clearly. It does not say be nice to others. It does not simply say ‘Love others’. Flowers, perfume, gifts are not always enough – as the Beatles quite wisely said – Money Can’t Buy Me Love…although they didn’t leave us with an alternative! It says love others in the same way you love yourself. And I think a key way of understanding this should be ‘listen and respect others just as you would want to be listened to and respected’.

It is this type of individualism I feel that can put a greater strain on a family and the multiple relationships that go on there. In fact I would say that the closer the relationship between two people, the more chance there is that one or both of the partners in the relationship will hide and escape to the comforting pastures of individualism. After all this is a return to the womb of creation – this is how Adam was initially created – separate, alone, not needing to listen to others, being himself without any others to impinge on his existence. Sometimes the thought is bliss!

I have known many examples where brothers and sisters do not talk to each other. And how complicated is the sibling relationship. How much baggage do siblings carry with them from their childhood. Parents do their best, but they pass on the baggage that they received from their parents in turn. Have you ever read Philip Larkin’s poem ‘This be the Verse’ – it is one of my favourites although the language in it means I probably can’t quote it all in front of the Aron Kodesh. But I will have a go:

What is great about Larkin’s poem is that there is no apportioning of blame. Things are just the way they are. ‘Man hands on misery to man’. Baggage does not get left anywere. And so children grow up receiving this, go their own way and often fall out, do not talk or just do not relate to each other again. I think also that our individualism, our care for the self, our stronger confidence and will mean that our potential to move on and forgive the past, our ability to get over the baggage will be much much less. Yes, there are often triggers to a broigez, but often it is not an actual event, a situation – rather it is what one perceives the other side is thinking, feeling or doing. Noone checks, the individualism pushes us back and away. If we would communicate without fear, we may find a way through!

As we know, the biblical Joseph had a most complicated relationship with his brothers. There was certainly baggage passed down from their father in the way he treated them all and favoured Joseph. He had a wife that he desperately wanted to be with and one he certainly did not initially want to wed. But of course the story has a happy ending as we are taught by our teachers and by Broadway. But what we are not taught is what happens when Jacob dies. Yes, the brothers bowed down to Joseph as Viceroy of Egypt. Yes they are reunited. But now Joseph has the power. And maybe things were good only when Jacob was alive. Listen to these wise words of the great German 19th century Rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch:

**As long as children live about a father, a mother, for so long do they find in their parents a force which holds them together. Even amongst the best of children there can be small differences, but as long as the parents are alive, all discord vanishes in common love and attachment to them. After the death of the parents, the bond holding the children together becomes loosened, they do not meet so frequently and become more estranged from one another when father and mother no longer form the central point’**

Now this may not always work. But what we certainly learn is that sibling relationships are not simple at all. And so if one does have difficulties in the relationship with a sibling it is certainly the time, on Yom Kippur to push back against individualism, escapism, stubborn will and both think about strategies for moving forward, and begin communicating without fear.

As I mentioned on Rosh Hashana, I have become close to a group of grandparents who have no contact whatsoever with their grandchildren. Their children and sons or daughters in law have for different reasons restricted access to their parents. This is a group of people who really are suffering. They bring children into the world, bring them up as best they can and then when grandchildren come into the world, they are prevented from such a deep satisfaction, pride and enjoyment. Grandparent alienation as it is called, often goes hand in hand with parental alientation. In other words what happens is that after a messy divorce, the partner who has custody ensures that the children do not see the other parent, and then they also will not see one set of grandparents. And given the continued increase in divorce, there has also been an increase in the number of parents and grandparents who are alienated from their children or grandchildren and so miss out on crucial experiences. And whereas there are legal rights regarding maternal or paternal contact; there are not as concrete legal rights available for grandparents. Achieving contact through the court system is an incredibly difficult and often painful path. In the group I visit, none of the couples have children who divorced. Often what has happened is that a child has taken a different path in life – for instance become more religious. This is difficult sometimes for the parents. When I became more religious, it was not totally easy for my parents. But I had a stable, loving upbringing with no traumas of any sort thank God, and so we all dealt with it in the end. For some families, it may not be like that. And so a child may not totally respect the way their parents lives their lives; parents also may impinge on the individual choice made by their son and daughter. Throw into the mix the entrance of the son or daughter in law and this mix can be very dangerous. And in some cases, the child decides that they should punish their parents and not give access to the grandchildren. Is anyone to blame – often the answer is no. I listen carefully to these grandparents, often hearing them rant about how disrespectful their children are. But that is only one side. It is tragically and sadly not so simple. This is another example when individualism gets in the way, when the obsession with ‘my way’ of doing it gets in the way. There always is another way – that is just a reality of life. This does not mean that the grandparents I saw can suddenly get on with their children with total love. But they can learn which buttons not to press and to understand what happens in their children when they press the wrong buttons. And the children can think carefully about how it is unfair and not entirely right to blame their parents for the past. Sometimes we just need to move on, move past, move beyond – and simply see what happens next!

The office of National Statistics reported in 2011 that 42% of marriages end in divorce, and that 34% of marriages, just over a third would end in divorce by the 20th wedding anniversary. And since many couples today are living without marriage, this does not include the percent of dissolution of cohabiting individuals who have not married. In 2007 the number of non-married cohabitants was 73%. I am not an expert on the current trends in marriage and divorce and certainly do not want to make glib, simple comments on why divorce rates have stayed high and why marriage rates have dropped. What we can certainly say is that it has become harder for a couple to stay together in marriage or in a partnership.

My dear friends. Yom Kippur is a time when we can move past, when we can move on. Yom Kippur is a time of Shalom. And I am not saying that Yom Kippur is a time of giving in, capitulation, total compromise. We are who we are – I tell my daughter very often – be who you are! But shalom comes from the word shalem, which means complete. We are separate beings with separate stubborn wills – but we are not complete without the completion of the other. It is simply up to us to be forgiving of who and what the other is!

Now I must say to you all tonight, on this special night of completeness, when we are all here together. We, here at Muswell Hill can be proud that we are trying hard to get the balance right between the individual and the community. And it is something that I set out to work on from the first day I came here. The Shul now clearly is a combination of what the I can do for the Shul, and what the Shul can do for me.

There are more members volunteering for a range of events, from Yom Hashoah to Yom Haatzmaut, from the Kiddush rota to putting together our magazine. There is a feeling of enterprise in the Shul with at last cosmetic changes being made in the building, with a wonderful new website. And this all requires time given by people. We have a Welfare Network which again needs members to support. And so in turn the community offers its members many layers of support through its Rabbi, a calendar of events and activities, and much more. There is nothing wrong with the expectation that the community should deliver some basic services to its members.

Most recently, we have increased our commitment to the Youth Director scheme which last year was a great success and we have a strong feeling will continue and grown even stronger this year with our first female youth director and in total four directors. Children in many age groups will have connection will be able to engage with Matt who continues, and is joined by Josh, Natasha and Ben.

Friends, we are a community that is desperate to continue with its vibrant outlook. We are a community that is anxious that our young have exciting, inspiring and educational experiences within our Orthodox community. These experiences will surely solidify their Jewish identity and support them in making Jewish guided decisions as they grow into adulthood. It is not enough that we proxy out the experiences that our young have any more to other youth groups and to Jewish schools. We must continue to show our young how important loyalty and connection to a community is. When I was a kid, brought up in Edinburgh, the only youth experience was in the Synagogue. Yes it was through a youth group – for me Maccabi and Study Group – but it was axiomatic that it would happen in Shul. Here in north London it is not that way at all. I can meet others in a Jewish school, at after school clubs, at other youth groups and at other Shuls. So it is imperative that we are on the map in providing youth provision – and last year it was so impressive how the children kept coming back for more.

And for this to continue, we need you to give generously tonight to our Kol Nidrei appeal. We can be honest – the Youth Directors scheme, as well has being great value for money, may not be sustainable in the long run. And that is beside other projects or ideas that we feel may benefit our community in ensuring it remains vibrant and therefore a valid choice for those who move into the area or who already live here. So please, show your commitment to what we are building here in Muswell Hill, so we can continue and sustain it for many years.

And all this is the ‘If I am not for myself, who will be’. We need to raise money for things that we care about. We need to bring back even more of the pioneering spirit of this community in the 1960’s when this Shul was built and a community built inside it. At that time people raised massive sums of money to have this building right for a Synagogue – and we know that now in 2013 there are modest changes that can be done to somewhat update it, maintaining the beautiful character of our Synagogue sanctuary.

But of course there is the ‘And if I am for me, what am I’. We need to extend our hand outside the Synagogue. And this year, we have decided to give to Youth Aliyah Rescue, Tzedek and Tribe.

But for this to continue we need your support.