Rosh Hashana Day 1

You must excuse me on this special day, when we crown G-d as King, in mentioning a sketch from Monty Python’s ‘Life of Brian’. But it will set the scene for me sermons on Rosh Hashana and at Kol Nidrei. Each one of these sermons will be part of a whole, with different facets of a single, critical theme.

If you remember, when Brian is heralded as the Messiah he runs from this mob chasing him to the desert. When he returns home, he still cannot shake off the large group of followers he has. And so he addresses them in the most serious part of the film...if there is a serious part. But he fails in persuading them that they are all different. He tells them that they are ‘All individuals’ to which they reply in unison ‘We are all individuals’. But one older man shouts ‘I’m not’...and is immediately shut up by others. Great Python humour. But it throws up the fine line between being an individual with separate and different ideas; and being part of a group or part of a collective, subjugating your ideas to those of the group.

We can look at society and ask the question – are people today more individualistic than they were or are they more community minded than before. Are they more interested in community life or less interested? Is it a bad thing to be an individualist or is it a positive attribute?

At the moment there is much debate as to whether people are more selfish and less able to give and to contribute to society. Our Prime Minister previously lamented that society was not a big enough priority in people’s minds today and that we needed to return to the idea that our previous Chief Rabbi called ‘social covenant’.

In philosophy, individualism and collectivism find two sources. Individualism comes from the philosopher Thomas Hobbes who felt that people were naturally in a state of individualism and that without the limiting force of society and a social contract there would be conflict between individuals. So for Hobbes, the baseline position of existence is individualism. Quite different to this was the idea posited by Jean Jacques Rousseau that people are bound together by society. Yes we are all separate existing people, but we are naturally bound together.

So in our lives today, where do we stand? I think there is greater evidence today in society that the beliefs of the individual are growing in confidence, and outweighing the ideas and beliefs put forward by society. And this trend has grown from the 1960’s and has continually effected our decisions when they come up against, when they seem to contradict a higher authority. If we can imagine a pendulum swinging between collective spirit and individualistic spirit, I think that the pendulum has swung towards the individual. So for instance, the structure of the family has changed. Structures such as couples not marrying, same gender couples that were not accepted in the past, that were taboo are now no longer taboo and are widespread. Whereas in the past people accepted society’s judgement, in recent times people have wriggled out of any societal judgement and created new norms. It is possible that the individualistic spirit has dictated to society.

Now this may be a harsh judgement by the way. In Ethics of the Fathers we read the following statement of Hillel:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me. And if I am for myself, what am I

These seem two contradicting messages. Be for yourself. Don’t be for yourself. I believe that they are bidding us to balance the individualistic spirit with the desire to be part of a collective. So the fact that in the last few decades, people have cared about individualist sentiments is not wrong at all. It just means that people have been fed up being told what is right and wrong and being told what to do and have needed to work it out for themselves. Judaism does not reject individualism at all. Far from it. But if individualism is unchecked, then it can be dangerous for all.

I want to look with you all this year over Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur at three areas of our lives where our growing individualism may have had an effect. Today I will look at our knowledge of our religion; tomorrow I will look at how we dress and view our bodies, and on Kol Nidrei I will look at the family and the stresses that it is suffering.

One of the highlights of my year has been the relationship that I have developed, and that we developed really with our local Bravanese community. They suffered a terrible blow when their centre was burned down in an arson attack and it took them a while to get over this. And the Bravanese are a religious Moslem community, very observant of Moslem law. At the end of their academic year, the community holds a completion ceremony where children show that they have finished learning part or all of the learning of the Koran. I was invited to this ceremony which was attended by hundreds of the Bravanese community and held at the North London Business Park in Friern Barnet. It was an inspiring event – inspiring because so many young got up and off by heart recited copious amounts of the Koran. I was thinking to myself how much of the Tanach I could or others could quote. I am lucky that I have been layening regularly for 10 years and on many occasions before I became a Rabbi – but without that my ability to quote would have been limited.

And so watching these Bravanese children dressed in white recite their main religious text, it made me think about our communities, our centrist Orthodox communities, the United Synagogue, and our knowledge of the main texts of our religion.

We are a community that thinks a lot about kindness, about justice and about tzedaka. But do we look after our Torah? How do we understand and define Torah? How do we today as a modern community relate to the Torah and ensure that future generations are conversant in its wisdom?

Our now previous Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks, when he penned Community of Faith for the 125th Anniversary of the United Synagogue lamented that Anglo Jewry has not recently been high on Jewish scholarship. And today if one wants to read scholarly articles on Jewish issues, Israel and America are the destinations, not the UK.

I wonder sometimes whether our growing sense of the individual, the subjective means that there is a sense of fear or even distance that people share towards the Torah. Maybe it is because of the language barrier. Maybe it is because the Torah is perceived as not relating to the world we live in – and maybe it is because us Rabbis do not diversify enough the way we teach Torah today. Maybe it is because first and foremost the Torah represents a world of obligation outside of us, hard to understand and hard to rationalise.

But what is clear to me is that Torah, the Torah is a critical part of our identity as Jewish people. It is our constitution. It is our founding national document. It has kept us going as a people for so long. And so we need to find ways in our lives, in 2013 that we can become more aware, more knowledgeable of this critical component of who we are. I am not saying here by the way, that we should let the Torah take over your lives. I am not even talking in terms of keeping mitzvoth, commandments – about observation levels. That is for the outreach workers and as you know I am not one of them. I am talking in terms of the identity that we all share, our Jewish identity which is in my mind incomplete without knowledge of the Torah.

And I think we need, all of us to recognise, that the Torah is an equalising force in our religion. We simply need to take our talents of self expression and engage with the texts of the Torah.

Listen to this wonderful source from the Mishna:

Rabbi Shimon said – there are three crowns, the Crown of priesthood, the Crown of kingship and the Crown of Torah. If one was to give much silver and gold, he would not be able to acquire the crown of priesthood and the crown of kingship. But regarding the Crown of Torah – when it comes to striving to learn Torah - anyone who wants to come and take, should come and take.

This is a most important source. Being a Kohen, and being a King is to do with yichus – your father needed to be a Cohen or your father needed to be a king. There is a familial order set down here and nobody, but nobody can break in.

However, Torah is different. The Torah is defined as being open to all. Yichus should not be relevant here. The Torah should be inclusive of those who wish to take part in its learning – or according to the Mishna, those who wish to strive in learning Torah.

Again – Torah is not for the chosen few. Torah is not just for ‘frum’ Jews to learn in their Batei Midrash and in yeshivot. It is for us all as a nation. In many ways Torah is a levelling, equalising force. Torah is the link for all of us between the subjective and the objective; between the individual and the collective.

So for instance in terms of the equality of opportunity between men and women, Torah sticks out as an area where that equality can exist. Yes there are different approaches within Orthodoxy as to what a woman should be or should be not advised to learn. But the opportunities for female scholarship in Jewish learning are continuing to grow. There are many centres of Jewish learning for women across the world.

In terms of access, language should not be a barrier to learning. Yes, of course it is ideal to learn in Hebrew, the language of the Torah. This helps learn the nuances of the text and begin to interpret and comment on the text. But there are many texts now that are translated into our own language from the Chumash, to Mishna, Talmud, commentaries on the Torah, books of Jewish thought and more. Language should not be a barrier or an excuse now to a lack of Torah, Jewish knowledge.

And thirdly – we can all as individuals interpret. We can all be creative with the text. In fact that is what Midrash is. I feel that Midrash is often not taught properly, especially at our Jewish primary schools –this is a real issue for me. Often children come home and have learned stories which are midrashic stories – and that have been taught them as happening in the Torah itself. I want to say this loud and clear first of all – Midrash is not a book of stories. Midrash is a series of statements written by Rabbis who have creatively derived ideas from the text of the Torah. They may clothe the idea in a story or parable – but the end point is always not the story, it is the idea lying behind it and we are bid to strive – and I use that word again – to strive to find the meaning, the idea behind it. If we are willing to build a relationship with the texts of our religion then we will all be able to do this. There may be some small number of limits to the breadth of interpretation, but there is much room inside for us all.

Let me tell you about Ruth Calderon. Ruth is 51, has a PhD in Talmud, set up pluralist Torah learning institutions in Israel and was 13th on the Yesh Atid Knesset list for the elections earlier this year. As Yesh Atid polled at 19 seats, Ruth found herself in the Knesset. Her acceptance speech, her maiden speech became a YouTube hit, with over 177,000 hits within the first week. She did something not expected by many of those in the Knesset – Ruth gave a class in Talmud and explained how beautiful this book was for us as a people. I want to quote from a part of her speech. Her words are amazing. After telling the Knesset about her past, she says the following:

**I am recounting all of this in order to say that I grew up in a very Jewish, very Zionist, secular-traditional-religious home that combined Ashkenaz and Sepharad, [Revisionist] Betar and [Socialist] Hashomer Hatzair, in the Israeli mainstream of the 60s and 70s. I was educated like everyone else my age – public education in the spirit of “from Tanach to Palmach”. I was not acquainted with the Mishna, the Talmud, Kabbala or Hasidism. By the time I was a teenager, I already sensed that something was missing. Something about the new, liberated Israeli identity of [Moshe Shamir’s] Elik who was “born of the sea”, of Naomi Shemer’s poems, was good and beautiful, but lacking. I missed depth; I lacked words for my vocabulary; a past, epics, heroes, places, drama, stories – were missing. The new Hebrew, created by educators from the country’s founding generation, realized their dream and became a courageous, practical, and suntanned soldier. But for me, this contained – I contained – a void. I did not know how to fill that void, but when I first encountered the Talmud and became completely enamoured with it, its language, its humour, its profound thinking, its modes of discussion, and the practicality, humanity, and maturity that emerge from its lines, I sensed that I had found the love of my life, what I had been lacking.**

**I am convinced that studying the great works of Hebrew and Jewish culture are crucial to construct a new Hebrew culture for Israel. It is impossible to stride toward the future without knowing where we came from and who we are, without knowing, intimately and in every particular, the sublime as well as the outrageous and the ridiculous. The Torah is not the property of one movement or another. It is a gift that every one of us received, and we have all been granted the opportunity to meditate upon it a we create the realities of our lives. Nobody took the Talmud and rabbinic literature from us. We gave it away, with our own hands, when it seemed that another task was more important and urgent: building a state, raising an army, developing agriculture and industry, etc. The time has come to reappropriate what is ours, to delight in the cultural riches that wait for us, for our eyes, our imaginations, our creativity.**

Incredible and inspiring words from Chaverat Knesset Ruth Calderon.

Friends, I think that our individualistic spirit, our fear of our religious heritage, our need to understand everything, has prevented us from gaining knowledge of our most cherished heritage, the Torah. Let us use this year to begin a journey to greater awareness of our texts, greater knowledge and greater understanding. Let us take the advice of our new Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis and go on a journey with him to create a more knowledgeable community. Let our Torah and the texts of our religion be the glue that will connect our need to understand with our communal Jewish identity. We will only be more complete if we try.