Rosh Hashana Sermon Day 2

Yesterday, through the greatness of Monty Python I talked about the pendulum swinging between individualism and collectivism. If it swings too far towards individualism, then people forget their roles as part of a society or of a community. They forget their sense of duty to society and they forget the effects on others their actions have. If the pendulum swings too much towards collectivism, then people act on a sense of duty, possibly out of fear, and do not express themselves enough. It is a balance between satisfying our duty and expressing ourselves that we desire. And I think we have taken steps towards this.

Let me explain. Many members of the United Synagogue, especially my generation, were not content with a Jewish educational system that told us what to do, without giving any understanding and explanation. Blindly following, acting by rote was not seen as a healthy way. The individualistic spirit dictated that what we do not understand, or do not agree with we challenge whether we carry it out or not. So it is possible that observance levels are lower in our communities as people are less content with keeping and observing simply because it is what we are supposed to do.

The relationship to the Rabbi is different today than it was possibly a generation ago. Was there more respect for the Rabbi a generation ago or was the relationship such that people would not dare express their own individual, personal feelings on religion to the Rabbi if there was a gap between the two. Today people want, quite rightly to feel comfortable with the Rabbi. On the one hand this means that the possibility of respect in the sense of awe is less. On the other hand, I think that the potential to learn from a Rabbi is much greater now that the distance between member and Rabbi has been reduced.

I have recently been attending and supporting a group of grandparents, who for different reasons have no access whatsoever to their grandchildren. Some have not seen their grandchildren for at least five years or more. This is a most complicated situation and is often triggered by the gap between two generations. The grandparents may not value the way their children are living. The children may feel judged by their parents. Add if previous complications in the relationship of both spouses to their parents and other childhood or teenage traumas exist then this can cause an alienation of one set of grandparents taking away their rights to be grandparents and the grandchildrens’ rights to have grandparents. I will come back to this special group of people on Kol Nidrei. But I do remember one lady explaining to the group that she feels that the younger generation simply do not have any ‘derech eretz’ – in other words respect. Now maybe this is always an observation of the older generation. But I do feel that the levels of confidence, the levels of chutzpah let’s say, and so the potential for rudeness and crassness have risen in our generation. My generation was brought up in a more stable financial environment, has not lived through any world wars, generally owns their own home, holidays regularly. More women are working than before, a good thing. Our children are encouraged to be confident and competitive which has a bad as well as good side to it, especially for those who are not confident and competitive.

Let me take this idea into our Rosh Hashana machzor. We are about to say in our Mussaf prayer:

‘U’Ba Shofar Gadol Yitaka, V’kol demama daka yishama’

‘And the great shofar will be sounded, and a quiet voice will be heard’

When the prophet Elijah was taken to mount Sinai and experienced God’s presence, God said

‘not in the wind, earthquake and fire is God, but in the still quiet voice’

These are emotional words. One thing about our individualism, our growing confidence, our growing chutzpah is that we are all getting louder, noiser. And the problem with this is that it drowns out the quiet people, the less confident people, the less successful people. They feel helpless and unable to compete with the noise. God is telling Elijah, we will read in our machzor – that the small, quiet voice is just as important if not more so.

We need to attach greater value to the soft voice. To the back stories that people have; to the hidden stuff of existence. This is how I was taught by my Rabbis, most specifically Rabbi Riskin shlita of Efrat – that a Rabbi gets to know his members and learns the stories that are not public, that are part of the individual’s challenging life. And sometimes we need to teach our children to stop, take a breath and look around and tune to the stories that other people carry with them. It is not enough to encourage our kids to give love to those elsewhere who are underprivileged. We need to encourage our children to show love to those around at school and at home.

This is idea is one of those that motivates me to take groups to Poland. Each time I have taken a trip we have always visited a special museum called the Galicia Jewish Museum in Krakow. It has a wonderful and insightful photographic exhibit constructed together by Chrish Shwartz who passed away and professor Jonathan Webber. The point of the museum is to look at the traces of Jewish memory left over from the Holocaust and how we and how the Poles related to these traces of memory. The last picture never fails to move me. It is the picture of the sign leaving a small town of village called Dobra, which actually means good. It has a picture of Dobra with a line through it as one is leaving. Chris saw this sign as symbolic and representative of the many, many towns where there would be no Jews left any more after the Jewish persecution in Poland in the Holocaust. But it also represented our responsibility now to remember and uncover the memory of those many hundreds of Polish Jewish communities. Not necessarily to resettle there, but to write and retell what happened there. They are the tragic back stories of our history. It is in these many hundreds of places that we experience the still quiet voice, as opposed to the great shofar we hear in are many thousands of Synagogues across the world. And that, God told Elijah, is where he is to be found.

So again, I am comparing here the loud shofar to the louder individualism that exists. The competitiveness, the materialism. The quiet, still voices are those who may not have succeeded. Who may not have had luck in their lives. Or just are quieter in their nature.

Another area where this plays out is how we dress and the way we cover our body. This is of course a sensitive topic, what we wear is a very personal decision. What we wear also traverses the line between individual expression and collective, communal norms.

And I should assure you all that what I will say now is not a good old fashioned preaching sermon. I know my Synagogue, I know my community and I am aware that my office door (wherever that is) will not be pounded down by hordes of hysterical members wanting to know how to keep the whole of Jewish law. But at the same time I don’t want you to reject what Jewish law has to say about how we live. It may well come in handy! And as I said to you before, I relate to you all as people of value who have made your own choices in life. What is important for me, and should be for other Rabbis as well is to build up conversation with our communities on this issue and on many others. Our mode needs to move in this post modern world from one of preaching to one of conversation.

In January 2012, a British born Rabbi called Alex Israel wrote a most brilliant article on the issue of modesty in reaction to some of the outrageous incidents that were occurring in Israel. You may remember how for instance a young girl was spat on in a neighbourhood in Bet Shemesh, women were being harassed to move to the back of the bus. There has been a definite move by the ultra-Orthodox movement to the extreme and towards removing women completely from public space. Rabbi Israel in his blog says that this is simply not a Jewish attitude. He quotes a story that happened to him. Here are his words:

Some years ago, a Rabbi friend told me the following story. A congregant had approached him and asked to speak to him about a situation that was on his mind. The Rabbi asked him what the problem was:

"Well Rabbi," He said, "Yesterday, I attended Sheva Berachot."

"Mazal Tov!" responded the Rabbi. "What is the problem?"

"Well, the kalla got up to give a Devar Torah" the congregant said uneasily.

""Wonderful!" responded the Rabbi.

"Well," said the man, "She was very attractive and it was inappropriate."

The Rabbi engaged him in discussion on the topic, with the congregant frustrated by his inability to express what he found as the point of his discomfort.  At a certain point, he blurted out: "A women is just, quite simply, an object of immodesty!"

Rabbi Israel decries how the Charedi world has actually made the woman into a sexual object by constantly fearing how men will react when they see or are in the presence of women. In fact this is not a Jewish approach. There are many laws in Judaism that regulate contact between man and woman – for instance a man cannot be alone with a woman, men and woman should not have affectionate physical contact other than husband/wife and close relatives. But these and other laws predicate that men and women are in fact in contact with each other. So the concept of modesty is to allow men and women to relate to each other in the public space without sexualising the woman.

The great Rav Moshe Feinstein for instance, had no issue with men and women being on a subway carriage or bus together if there was no room to sit down and they were pushed up against each other. People generally are not looking for a less spacious environment – that is how they happen to be travelling. He advises the individual who has sexual thoughts in this situation not to travel.

On the other hand, and at the other extreme, today we are much freer at exposing our bodies. This is not a new phenomena but it may becoming more of a norm and what I note is that relentless peer pressure means that parents have much less influence on what their children wear. And I wouldn’t call myself over old fashioned, and halacha aside I am sometimes shocked with how teenage girls are dressing today. And I want to be honest with you – I am not shocked simply because this behaviour is against halacha. My shock is driven by a genuine care, and that so many wonderful teenagers enter a public world which is so sexualised and that what matters is the look and the attraction rather than the character and what is inside. What is winning is the loud shofar and what is losing is the quiet voice.

Here I have shown you two extremes. An extreme that takes woman and places her out of public eye in order to protect men. And an extreme that uncovers, exposes women and so contributes to the sexualising of woman that is part of our society.

In the middle is a place where yes, less of our bodies are exposed – but this is not modesty for the sake of modesty. This is not the old collectivism of doing what you are told and not asking questions. This is modesty in order to allow individuals to connect and engage far from the field of sexualisation.