**Rosh Hashana – First Day Sermon**

There is a famous quote from the book of Ecclesiastes, one of the five megilot – and I have quoted it and heard it quoted often – ‘It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to a party’. Now that would seem certainly to us as counterintuitive. We all love a party – we all love a good party. Being in the cemetery is usually associated with pain and grief. But is that really the case? Are there times when you have been to a cemetery, to visit loved ones who passed from this world many years ago? Have you been at the funeral of someone who passed on at a ripe old age, and his or her family are celebrating his life as well as mourning their loss. Have you been able to let your mind slip from the chatting with friends and family on the way down to the grave, and think about the place you are in and what it means. I do – I do whenever I go there. I think of the people who I have known and loved from my communities and who are now at eternal rest. Some in their time, some before their time. But my mind wanders to think of other things – and my thoughts are always deeper than any thought I will have at a party...especially if the music is blaring load and there are some Sushi to be eaten!

At a cemetery I think about blessing. I think about loss. I think about the blessing that my family has – and the vulnerability that that all entails. In other words, a cemetery is important because it teaches us all that we are not really in control down here on earth. We sometimes think that we are – but we are not.

Dear Members – it is not cowardly to admit that we are as people, vulnerable. This is the nature of being born into this world. Life is a stormy sea, a whirlwind, a journey through rocky land. It needs emotional navigation and we are not always equipped for the traps that lay in store. We can sometimes feel blessed by what we have. But we can equally feel pain by what we lose. Sometimes the pain of loss is so acute that one will need to wait years until feeling once again the joy of blessing. It is equally possible that one can feel so showered with blessing, that he or she cannot understand and muster the strength to withstand difficulty. Vulnerability here means – hey – I am doing OK. I have a wife, two kids, a four bedroom house, a good school for the kids a car or two, holidays to great places. But I know that life is not that simple – I know that stuff happens!

A really powerful example of this vulnerability is the reaction of Sarah, when she hears about the experience of her son Isaac, being bound by Abraham and almost being slaughtered. Sarah dies when she hears this, and the philosopher and commentator Aviva Zornberg (I should note born in Scotland) emphasises the fact that Sarah did not die out of grief. She knew Isaac had survived. What was important here was the fact that he ‘almost’ died. This vulnerability was too much for her.

But let us look at Rosh Hashana for some solace in this world. It is my belief that Rosh Hashana and the 10 days leading up to Yom Kippur are an oasis for us where we can regain a sense of control and heal our sense of vulnerability. It will not give us absolute security in terms of our financial, physical and health – but it will be a refuge that will give us moral security, a security through which we can define the values that we live by irrespective of how rocky life is. It is like that scene in a great 1990’s film – ‘Shawshank Redemption’. Andy, who has been incarcerated for many years unjustly, gains access to the prison wardens office, where he finds an LP and plays over the loudspeaker a piece from the Marriage of Figaro to the whole of the prison. As his friend ‘Red’ narrates, and I don’t thing I could really do Morgan Freeman justice if I attempted his accent ‘For the briefest of moments, every last man at Shawshank felt free’.

This is why we are so in awe of people who show such strength in their suffering. The ALS sufferer who recently explained what he will fight against so emotionally when doing the ice bucket challenge. Following the journey Steve Evans took through illness, as charted on Radio Five and by Richard Bacon. There are many more of course.

So Rosh Hashana is when we rise up above the vulnerability of life. We take control of the area we really can succeed in controlling – our moral and spiritual lives.

I would like to show different aspects of how this dynamic works, how Rosh Hashana is an oasis of control in a turbulent world, through looking at the four names of this festival.

Of course we are most familiar with the name Rosh Hashana, the head of the year. Rosh Hashana, and following it the 10 days of Return culminating in Yom Kippur are very unique and very different than the rest of the year. It is almost as if they are a unit by themselves in the calendar. We are taught that God is closest to us at this time. There are many who talk about the 10 day difference between the solar year and the lunar year (well OK, it can sometimes be 11, but go with me on this) as referring to the 10 days of Teshuva. In other words, this period of time, beginning with Rosh Hashana as the head of the year, can be looked upon as outside of the year, and outside of the normal rhythm of time. And this may be contrasting the 10 days that begin today with the rest of the year.

We cannot control time – in fact this is a fact that irks us greatly. We grow older and we detest growing older and how we change. Our children grow older and this makes us feel even worse. I have a child who will be batmitzvah next year – we can’t quite believe that time has tricked us so much and we are where we are.

But maybe by taking these ten days and really taking stock of who we are and the potential that we have to bring good into this world, at least for these few days we are more in control of time. We cannot stop the clock – but we can beat the clock. We cannot turn back time – but we can use time and do so many positive things with it. Time may induce a sense of fear – an existential worry about what will happen when we ourselves move on. We may believe in an afterlife, but that may not help everyone.

Life is tough – but we must live life. This in fact is evoked by an incredible piece of Talmud:

‘The Rabbis taught: For two and a half years, the house of Hillel and the house of Shammai argued. One said that it was good that man had been created, and the other said that it would have been better for man to not have been created. They voted and determined that it would have been better not to have been created, but now that he had been created, he should investigate his deeds’

So that is my first aspect of this festival – we may not be able to control time all year round. But we are given this oasis of time where we can take a breather to consider how we are doing as people.

Another name we are all aware of is Yom HaZikaron which translates for many as a ‘Day of Remembrance’ – although I would append a question to this name for you all – what is to be remembered, and who is to do the remembering. Are we the Jewish people remembering something – or is God remembering? There is a great discussion there for Rosh Hashana lunch over your tzimmes and gefilte fish! According to the silent amidah that we will all be saying together soon, it is God who remembers – but it is we who make God remember. And what do we want God to remember – the time when Avraham bound his son Yitzchak and showed such strong faith in obeying God’s word. When God is so to speak reminded by us of this, we believe that he will remember us for the good and this will ensure God acts in a merciful way and not solely as judge. That is why we relate to God as ‘Avinu, Malkenu’ – Our father who is merciful and our King who acts as judge.

The name Yitchak comes from laughter. But laughter can be joyous – and can equally be sarcastic or cynical. In fact Sarah laughs sarcastically as she cannot really believe that at an old age, she can actually have a child. Laughter can represent the chasm that exists between what should happen, and what does in fact happen. But Yitzchak was someone who never laughed. The binding at the hands of his father changed him forever and so the forefather named after laughter, is not himself able to laugh.

Laughter is often a way to probe what is too serious in our lives. It is a way of admitting that we are not totally in control.

A third name for Rosh Hashana is Yom Teruah, A Day of Blowing, which relates directly to the mitzvah of shofar. The main note that we blow on Rosh Hashana is the teruah, although there developed a controversy as to what exactly the Teruah sounded like – and that is why we end up blowing so many notes. Teruah can derive etymologically from ‘le-haria’ which means to call out in prayer.

But there is a clear connection in the word Teruah to the word ‘ray-a’ made of a reish and ayin, which means friend or loved one. We have all heard ‘v’ahavta l’reiacha camocha’ – you shall love your friend as you love yourself. And so the shofar is an instrument of unity, solidarity and harmony. Maybe we can understand the shofar as a call to withhold power over the other and to treat everyone with equal care.

We actually derive some of the laws of shofar from its use in announcing the beginning of the Jubilee year in the land of Israel. One of the facets of the Jubilee was that slaves were freed – the shofar therefore became a symbol of freedom and the teruah, a bringer of ‘ray-ut’ of love and harmony.

So on Rosh Hashana we can carefully take a look at how we view others. Our family, our friends, other people, people of other religions. I am not stating that we should naively shower love on everyone that we meet. But we should show openness to the possibility that the other is willing to live in a world with me and so deserves my respect. As I have said before here in Shul, you cannot be tolerant of those you know and are similar to you – but of those who are different and with which you may have serious differences.

We should note here also, that when the Mishna, written nearly 2000 years ago refers to Rosh Hashana, it mentions that ‘all those who live come before Him like sheep traversing the pass of Meron’. In other words, it is fascinating that on Rosh Hashana, everyone in the world is judged – and we the Jewish people are given the tools to make the judgement as sweet as possible – a great responsibility! In our silent Amidah on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we ask God to ‘give your awe over all your handiwork’ – we do not distinguish between one nation and the other.

So on Yom Teruah, the day of ray-ut, of friendship, we can try once again to claim back relationships that have gone through hard times. We can pick up the phone and talk to a sibling that we have not chatted to for ages. We can show more understanding for a parent, or a grandparent. We can ensure that our children have proper time with their grandparents. It is the day for the abuser to come to his senses, be contrite and allow a period of healing for the pain he has caused his spouse.

The shofar is an equaliser, a sound both to the individual and the nation to consider ways to move forward towards harmony. Even if we feel that harmony may be impossible, we have to, we must move in that direction.

And finally, Rosh Hashana is the Yom HaDin – the day of judgement. A day that emphasises how we have no control over God. God judges us this day – and we have no recourse at all. We are helpless – or are we? In one of his sermons on Rosh Hashana, Ramban, Moses Nachamnides who lived in Barcelona in the 13th century, explains how through the shofar, we are able to so to speak seduce God and encourage Him to move from his throne of Justice, to His throne of mercy. Now don’t ask me about the mechanics of how this happens – but it represents our ability to temper and sweeten God’s judgement. In fact what will have the most effect on God’s judgement is our teshuva, our repentance.

Now this idea contrasts how we would understand our relationship with God. We think of God, being Almighty and All knowing to be independent of all creation. And that is exactly what Maimonides describes. Here however, on Rosh Hashana and leading up to Yom Kippur, what we do can have an affect on God. It is as if God has given us these tools to sway Him in His judgement. This is not control of God of course – but it contrasts the idea of Maimonides which may relate to the rest of the year in that we are more helpless to have any influence on God.

Let us sum up what we have been saying with a famous phrase from the Talmud – that shows that we are not in total control of what happens to us...but we are in control of what and who we become

‘Everything is in the hands of heaven, except the fear of heaven’

Let us commit on Rosh Hashana, to nourish those aspects of our life, that we are given control over.

Shana Tova