Rosh Hashana Day 2 – Sermon

When I was Rabbi of my previous community, I made a decision that we should encourage women from time to time to give a Dvar Torah instead of the Rabbi. It would be once a month, and the woman speaking would stand by the mechitza rather than walk through the men’s section and speak from the pulpit. Many thought this was a great idea, and a number of interested women came forward and spoke. When the first Shabbat came to try out this new, and clearly heretical and anti Jewish idea, one gentleman, who I was very close with I should say and remain so, got up, left his seat and exited the Shul. After Shabbat the gentleman and I were at a simcha together. Now we were clearly not happy with each other. I felt and expressed my feeling, that his action had clearly been an inappropriate one. And his opinion expressed firmly to me was ‘Rabbi, you have to take a consistent approach to these things’. In other words the Rabbi could not take an approach that was sometimes permissive, and sometimes prohibitive. My reply was that a Rabbi needs to centre himself on the fence – some of his community will be on one side of the fence, and some will be on the other side and he needs to so to speak, metaphorically of course, put his arms round each side of his community. If consistency means always siding with some people in the community, he is not really leading the community. His reply was ‘Rabbi, if you sit in the middle of the road, you will get knocked over’. I think at that point we had to sit down to eat – and the fascination of that particular simcha taking place in the Coombe Wood Golf Club took over.

But that conversation has stuck with me until now and made a great impression upon me. I am a firm believer that religion, and that our religion can clearly coexist with balance and moderation. This approach is peppered around our texts. We have to balance work with Torah. We have to balance fear of God with love of God. We have to balance derech eretz with Torah. There are many more examples of balance.

The most famous Jewish scholar who took the idea of balance and made it into a theory of how we should behave is the 12th century scholar Maimonides, the Rambam. He took the Aristotelian concept of the golden mean and coined the term ‘the Middle path’. Rambam understood that people are born with a tendency that is not necessarily expressed by the middle path. One might have more of a tendency to get angry. One might have a tendency to be overly passive. One might be born more possessive, one might be born with more ability to share what he or she owns. Rambam wrote his theories as part of his legal magnum opus know as the Mishna Torah, or Yad HaChazaka. He was actually **legislating** for how one forms or reforms their character. In the first chapter, he makes it clear that extremes are negative, and the most positive path is the middle path, the one that is furthest from both extremes. So as an example, Rambam states that one should not be easy to become angry, and alternatively not be someone who is extremely passive in his reactions. Rather he should find the middle path, where he or she can be angry in certain necessary situations. This middle path should be grasped and acted upon constantly until the middle path becomes second nature.

This idea of a middle path was clearly based on that of the Greek philosopher Aristotle. In his Nicomacean Ethics among other works, he warns of the danger of excesses of character on the polity. Now this approach is rather a mathematical approach and is therefore quite static. We may go further to say – is it actually a realistic theory. I mean how many people do we know who actually have worked out the middle path between all the sets of characteristics that define who they are? It surely is nigh impossible.

But there is another criticism that may be even more damaging. In America, our type of orthodoxy, what we call United Synagogue orthodoxy is often labelled Centrist orthodoxy, or even by some as ‘moderate Orthodoxy’. And we take pride in that as a community. We are keen that the community is a traditional one, but not one that considers every strict interpretation of jewish law as the only valid such interpretation. But being moderate, or being in the centre can open centrist orthodoxy to the criticism…well of being stale, boring and let’s say parve. I mean if you always sit in the middle, if you always take the middle position, where then is the passion, the zeal, the zest for the religion. If the way that we determine what we do is always by using so to speak a ruler or measuring tape to see how far we are from the extremes – does that not empty centrist orthodoxy of any excitement.

In 1990 already, this question was asked by the then Dean of Yeshiva University, then and still today a bastion of modern Orthodox Judaism, Professor Norman Lamm. Norman Lamm described the criticism of modern orthodox as being in his words ‘emotionally inhibiting and spiritually bloodless’. Powerful words indeed. But think for instance close to home about our discussions as a community over the use of a mechitza in our downstairs area so that it can be used by women. We have worked hard to find a middle ground – but in finding a middle ground which I feel is an appropriate solution, have we lost sight of the emotional and spiritual aspect of our very presence in the Synagogue, the desire to pray.

Professor Lamm however, using the words of his esteemed Rav Joseph Soloveitchik who was for many years Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva University, suggests an alternative understanding of the mean. Here is Norman Lamm, explaining the approach of his Rav:

‘we err in assuming that Maimonides is prescribing an arithmetic approach to personal characteristics. Rather, Maimonides approach is far more subtle and dynamic. He favours going from one end to the other of the spectrum as necessity requires it so that in sum and on average we stay in the centre but not that we remain unalterably and unerringly glued to one mid point’.

Here we move from a simple mathematical model – to one where it is not at all about always being at the middle point. In fact Rambam himself writes

‘Our earliest Sages instructed us that a man ought always to weigh his dispositions and measure them and direct them to the middle way’

In other words, I need to weigh up and consider all the available options to me before I come to a decision. And that decision on how to act may not be expressive of the middle point. In fact, there are times when one needs to act in a more extreme way. But if this single action would be after clear reflection of other options available – one would not in this case be acting as an extremist. An extremist is someone who constantly acts in an extreme way without considering other options – and extremists can exist always on both sides of any spectrum. But as long as in the long run the average of all my actions is towards the centre, then Rambam would consider the span of actions of a person as expressing the middle path.

There is a short passage in the Talmud, which notes that the word for deceit in Hebrew, Sheker, is made up of the letters kuf, reish and shin that are adjacent to each other in the aleph bet. In contrast, the word for truth, emet, uses a letter from the beginning, middle and end of the aleph bet. The Talmud wants to conclude that falsehood is frequent – whereas honesty is rare – quite a pessimistic outcome really. Norman Lamm wants to conclude that we see here how emet, with its letters spanning the whole alphabet is based on a broad view of the world, whereas sheker or deceit can easily come about if ones view is based on a pinpoint of reality.

And so everyone, being a moderate is not boring, lifeless and parve. Being a moderate is not easy either. It needs constant attention to all the options open to act upon…and it is always going to be open to criticism of not being consistent. Being consistent is easy. If I took a strict view halachically on all questions that came my way – then there would be some who would say she-koach Rabbi Mason, you are being consistent for once. Great – but they would be the only ones left in the community in 10 years. But alternatively I am totally aware, and you all should be totally aware that if I always take a lenient view within the halachic reality of the Shul, this will cease to be moving towards a middle path. I also think our Chief Rabbi understands this as well. He will make decisions that will be considered by many as open minded – and others that are considered strict. Of course there are politics behind every decision one makes as a leader, but these decisions also represent a moderate way of acting. In a moderate community, you cannot have it all – you cannot have everything your way – just as when you support a political party that succeeds in government, it would be ridiculous to assume that you would now need to be in agreement with every decision that they make in government.

Now, this theory of being moderate has one or two other important ramifications for us all.

Firstly, we need to reflect on how we are using Facebook, Twitter and other social media carriers to form opinions and positions on a whole range of issues. I am not against Facebook and Twitter – I use them myself. I have found Facebook as a great way of keeping up to date with people that you see less often….and by the way I don’t mean your husband or wife! It is a way of sharing happy news with others that you are close with. Of course it also means that people are able to express hate filled opinions on the medium of Facebook without saying what they feel directly. Many of you have explained to me how much hate you have seen posted by Facebook friends relating to Israel’s conflict with Hamas.

But Facebook is the world of the pinpoint – the world of the moment and not at all the world of context and breadth. People are endlessly posting video clips and small pieces that prove their point and support their opinion. And when we watch – we are dragged into that specific line of thinking as well, without questioning the context of the clip. I have stopped watching posted video clips because of this – I do not often know of the source of the clip, who shot it and why – and yet I am allowing it to affect me. In the Gaza conflict this past summer, Hamas were the kings of creating deceit out of pinpoint, short videos of supposed Israeli atrocities. We found it incredible hard to rebut what the supporters of Hamas were levelling. But we certainly should not be copying their approach to try and win the media battle as to who was right or wrong. We know it was much more complicated – we need to fight with all our might that the moderate approach will win over the destructive extremist approach.

What I am saying here, is that we need to be applying Rambam’s Middle path to our use of social media – and also to our advocacy for Israel. We need also to educate our children that what we see and read on facebook is not always factually correct – and even if it is factually correct, not always can be immediately the basis for an opinion. Putting a word in a Google search engine, is not always going to retrieve an appropriate answer to a question. Nicholas Carr, in his book ‘The Shallows’, explains how the internet is changing how we think. He explains how Google is allowing and encouraging us to ‘slice and dice’ digital books – in other words to relate to tiny snippets of a book, rather than larger swathes of the books in which we are searching. Context is being replaced by narrowness.

Rosh Hashana is all about context. It is not a tick box exercise where we check which things we think that we are doing right and which things we think that we are doing wrong. This is not about what we would call ‘new year’s resolutions’. They may have their place – but we are more interested in reflection on who we are, and which direction we are moving as people. And that involves context. It involves thinking about our lives, the challenges we have undergone as people and with your loved ones. It involves thinking about what it means to be Jewish and how that can or should impact on our lives as people and as part of families. It involves reflecting widely on our relationship to Israel – a strong family bond, but one that constantly requires thought and energy.

Context, moderation, being centrist – they can all elevate our lives. I am proud to be moderate – I am passionate about my moderation. This is not to me a parev, empty life of passivism. It is the challenging choice of always reflecting on which choice is the best one. It is the Middle path.