

## Rosh Hashana 2<sup>nd</sup> Day 5774

On the eve of an Australian general election where each of us is required to cast our vote it is apposite that we read the *Unetane Tokef* prayer. *Kol Bayaei Olam Yaavrun Lefanecha* – All the people will pass before you. *Ken Taavir VeTispor ve Timneh veTifkod* – You cause to pass, count, calculate and consider. *VeTichtov et Gzar Dinam* – And you shall write their verdict.

“On Rosh Hashana it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed...” Based on the last election there could certainly be an interval of jockeying – before we discover who goes up and who goes down. Who is in power and who in opposition, whose political careers are on the ascendency and whose in decline.

*Unetane Tokef* ends with the notion that Tshuva, Tefilla and Tzeddaka – penitence, prayer and charity – *maavirin et ro'ah hagzera* – can avert the severity of the decree. Taking responsibility for the way we live our lives determines our future. Tshuva – a resolute look inwards at how we live our lives. Tefilla – The calling out for a better world, drawing attention to the causes that matter to us and society. Tzeddaka – the personal commitment and investment in making the world a better place.

The last few weeks we have been inundated with popularity ratings and trust ratings. Even unpopularity ratings and distrust ratings. We have had promises of expenditure and disputes over the costings. There has been a fair amount of rhetoric of who we're keeping out and where we're going to leave them. To my mind throughout the last few weeks there has not been much discussion of who we are bringing in and bringing up and how we are going to raise them.

Some political commentators have suggested that in many respects our politics is so centrist that there are no great disputes of principle. This has the consequence that we nit-pick on refinements of detail: copper wire or optical fibre, net to node service or direct from cyber to salon. What has been the extent of visionary statement by our leading candidates? “Can you imagine a government led by the other mob?”

The serious visionary Tshuva, Tefilla and Tzeddaka – where we are, what we really want and how we are going to get there have been in short supply. What is it that our society stands for? From what do we draw our national and human pride? What are the living values we prize?

While we might have to face the economic consequences of *being a part of* the Asian century we should equally articulate our aspiration – what are we hoping *to bring to* the Asian century? Or do we just see ourselves as irrelevant guests at someone else's party?

A few weeks ago I was up in Cairns enjoying the beauty of rainforest and reef. There are a no shortage of tours and experiences to suit every taste and drain every pocket. I thrilled at the 5 metre crocs and the iridescent blue scales on the Ulysses butterfly; at the towering rainforest kauri and the coral on the ocean floor. *Mah rabu maasecha Hashem* – how wonderful and diverse are your works O Lord. It is no wonder that the Psalmist finds inspiration in nature.

If King David were alive today our liturgy might include verses such as “I lift up my eyes to my touch screen monitor and behold digital mountains. Google Earth unfolds before me. Our life is measured in bits and bytes while Your glory exceeds the Gigabytes and Terrabytes...” And more frighteningly,

“Only you, the National Security Council and Julian Assange know the innermost thoughts of our hearts.”

While I was in Queensland I took a short guided tour just off the Kuranda Sky Train. Our guide was Arrun, who spoke with passion of the culture and traditions of his people, the Djabugay, whose history extended back to the Storywaters. He explained the creative force of Bulluru, the source of their sacred past, their tribal law and their ceremonies.

With every footstep, at every turn and at every tree, Arrun had tradition and explanation. He demonstrated the different uses of the barks and vines, how they were applied in weaving and clothing and weaponry. He knew the uses of roots and fruits, how to follow insect trails and what might be done with their nests. He understood the geology and the climate of his lands.

Arrun knew tribal history from the legend of Budaadji, the carpet snake who rose and created the Barron River Gorge through to the haunted lands where he and his brother once heard the voices and cries of our ancestors who were murdered by black trackers from the North.

Arrun was passionate about the learned tribal wisdom. He regretted that so often it was misrepresented or misunderstood. His community had adapted to its environment and had had sustainable mastery of it. He confided, “People think that our life was all about dancing and music. Mostly it was about survival. We had to know the rainforest. We had food and hunting techniques. Trapping. Animal psychology. We knew which fruits were edible or medicinal. We had dentistry and acupuncture, medicine and anaesthetics.”

Arrun spoke somewhat wistfully about his own upbringing. He had attended a local school where there was little respect for the past or ancestral ways. Even his parents were not much fussed. Only when doing a project on his grandparents had he discovered his family story and his connectedness with the soil and the spirit of the past. He had become captivated. He had read widely. He had learned tree by tree, vine by vine, textile by textile what it was to be Djabugay.

I asked him how the Djabugay elders related to him and if they appreciated him sharing Djabuhay wisdom with the tourists. Arrun told me that it was hard to get close to the elders. They were very wrapped in their ways and a little wary of his zeal – examining the Djabugay traditions through the prism of a modern Australian upbringing.

I had not realised that Frum from Birth and Baal Tshuva were also Aboriginal phenomena. Most of all though, I was grateful to Arrun – to have enjoyed a couple of hours with someone who revered and demonstrated the wisdom and the learning of the past and who could see beyond the commercialised tourist dollars of smoking ceremonies, semi-clad choreographic performance and boomerang throwing.

On Rosh Hashana we delve into *our* past and we state *our* purpose.

The Rosh Hashana Mussaf Service that we have just completed has three elements unique to today. Briefly in the silent Amida and extensively in the repetition, we have passages of *Malchiyot*, *Zichronot* and *Shofarot* – of Dominion, Remembrance and Shofar – which we punctuate with blasts of the Ram’s horn.

This service is prescribed in the Talmud: The Gemara states that the basis for these three themes is the following: God says “Say Malchiyot before me so that you can proclaim My Sovereignty upon you, Zichronot so that the good memories of your deeds will come before me and with what? With a shofar.”

The fourteenth century scholar and philosopher Joseph Albo explained that these three themes correspond to the three core tenets of Jewish belief.

Malchiyot (Dominion) is about the existence of God. Within its readings and with the focal point of Aleynu, we anticipate the day when everyone will recognise God as the King of the universe.

Zichronot (Remembrance) is about revelation and about reward and punishment. God has made his Presence and expectations known to us and we are accountable.

Shofarot teach us about the Torah as a heavenly and eternal covenant. We are taught that Shofar blasts introduced the giving of the Torah atop Sinai and know from the Torah and tradition that they proclaim our fidelity through our festive calendar, at times of national joy and also in solemnity and hope at times of sorrow.

According to Albo the message of the Shofar encapsulates these three themes: God’s universality, human accountability and our particular Jewish individuality. The shofar blasts of Mussaf punctuate these ideas. On Rosh Hashana we trumpet the manifesto of Jewish meaning.

When we blow the Shofar our service contains the verse from the book of Psalms “*Ki Chok LeYisrael Hu*” The Shofar is described in our liturgy as a peculiar Jewish statute and also as a national Jewish artform. After our Shofar blasts we read from Psalm 89 *Ashrei HaAm Yodea Teruah* - Happy is the people who knows the Shofar blast.

Happy is the people who knows the Shofar blast!

This is a verse which needs some explanation. If Scripture had taught “Happy are the people who have mastered the didgeridoo”, we could only be talking of our indigenous Australians – but let’s face it – we were not the first, only or last peoples to pucker our lips around a ram’s horn.

Even the Midrash makes the point, “Rabbi Josiah says “Happy is the people who know the Shofar – don’t many peoples of the world know how to blow a horn? Just consider how many horns there are – bugles and trumpets... What do we mean happy are the people who know how to sound the shofar? It means happy are those who know that the Shofar can move the Almighty – who know that its sound can lift Him from the throne of strict judgement to the throne of mercy.” For other peoples the Shofar is a noise. For other peoples the trumpet may be music or an alarm or a fanfare – but for us the shofar is a connection and a recollection... and that is one reason why the blessing is on the hearing and not the blowing of the horn.

While it is true that there are halachot aplenty on who should blow the shofar and how – unlike music, the craft of the shofar is not predominantly in the instrumentalist. It is the receptivity and perceptivity of the audience. When we *hear* the shofar do we *know* the shofar? When we *hear* the shofar do we imbue it with meaning that can move even God?

The universality of Rosh Hashana is found in its designation as the birthday of all humanity. It is the day that our shared world was created. “Look after My world” we are instructed by God in the Midrash, “For it is the only one you have.” Care for its resources and exploit them judiciously.

On Rosh Hashana we read of the casting out of Ishmael and Hagar – a troublesome story about clashes of values and cultures. From one perspective God backs Sarah in protecting Isaac against tyranny and idolatry. However there is no question that God teaches the universal responsibility that we must protect the refugee, cover the naked and feed the starving. It is unholy to let people perish – whether they are the Ishmaelites of yesteryear, the fleeing refugees of today, or the innocent children in Syria whose cries are being suffocated by Sarin gas.

Of course we must protect ourselves and our citizens, and protect our culture and protect our way of life. But we cannot be deaf to the cries, nor blind to injustice. The shofar is a call to awareness. Nor may we of all people, remain dumb. The shofar reminds us of our own experience. The shofar reminds us of our accountability. We, who seek to teach “never forget” have a special mitzvah to remember.

But Rosh Hashana is also very much about the Jewish and particular. It is about our community and about our identity. It is about our spiritual tradition. It is about our relationship with God.

Just as Arrun was concerned that his ancestral culture was lost behind a veneer of dance and music, so much of our scholarship and literature is forgotten beyond the glow of the Shabbat candles and the festive table. Just as Arrun had to start from scratch to become literate in the ways of his people many of our children and many of our grown-ups struggle with elementary Hebrew, following a service let alone a familiarity with Jewish law and Jewish lore.

It is not that we lack Jewish pride. It is not that we lack Jewish commitment. But when we hear the shofar sometimes we simply bask in it as symbolic Jewish music. We don’t respond to it as a call to rise up and reconnect. To be passionate about our heritage as a guide to the present which can imbue our every day with fulfilment, growth and learning.

The shofarot are a call to recall and recommit to an eternal covenant – to a wisdom which can help us navigate through the personal and ethical dilemmas of today just as they guided our people through the wilderness and into the Promised Land in times of old. Beyond the chopped liver and herring of cliché are principles of raising families, directives in education, ethical business practice, encouragement for the individual, protection of the community, celebration of the sanctity of life, compassion and understanding in the face of trauma, grief and oppression.

Where there are centres of Jewish learning, these are not stagnant vestiges of an ancestral past. They inform daily life and are being developed at the same breakneck pace as technology. Despite our continental remoteness in Australia, through travel and technology there is increasing covenantal proximity and opportunity for our own participation. Hearing the shofar when it’s blown in shul is certainly a mitzvah – but responding to it as a call for action is the true fulfilment. Listening to the shofar when it’s being blown in shul is certainly essential – but responding to its echo in your memory tomorrow and the next day is the true internalisation of our service.

The shofar moves God when we are moved and motivated.

There's a parable told of a wealthy businessman who was also a scholar, who was looking for a suitable match for his daughter. (It's clearly an old story. Now he wouldn't have much of a say in it; she'd find her own partner, if she wanted one, or browse for one online.)

He travelled around from town to town from yeshiva to yeshiva posing a difficult problem from the Talmud with the promise that anyone who could resolve it would be considered a suitable match. In one yeshiva after another the scholars vied for the chance to prove themselves. But one after another they failed and were turned away.

The businessman was readying to leave one town for the next when a student ran out to him and caught his attention. Stop! He cried. Just a minute.

The businessman stopped and the breathless student addressed him.

I have looked at the problem and can't begin to answer it. I know that by your reckoning I'm not suitable for your daughter. Even so, I'm Jewish and I care about the Torah. You posed a question... I've tried to understand. At least do me a favour and tell me the answer.

The businessman smiled and embraced him. He welcomed him as a fitting son in law. The Yeshiva students were baffled. "Everyone else who approached the problem was only looking to marry my daughter, he said, but then you all lost interest. This one, on the other hand, was prepared to play with the hand he was dealt, but he never lost sight of the Torah."

The trip to Kuranda was quite inspirational. I had noted Arrun's commentary in my phone. There's a bus journey from the train station back to the car park. We were met by Paul a jovial guy with just one arm. Our day trip over, we all piled in to the bus. Paul hopped into the driver's seat.

"You all enjoy the Skytrain?" he asked.

"And how about the Kuranda rail?"

"Pretty steep climbs and descents we have up here..."

"And tell me, how do you all feel about riding a seventy seater bus with a one-armed driver?"

Despite the nervous laughter the banter continued unabated.

"I don't like things to get me down" he said. "When you get back to your hotels Google one armed bus driver climbs Everest." I didn't need to wait till the hotel. I was at it immediately. Paul Hockey, just a few rows in front of me, driving my bus, was the first person with a disability to have reached the Everest summit.

As we approached a steep bend he sounded the horn.

And I can still hear it...

Wishing you all a Shana Tova.