

HaMagen



Magen Avot

The magazine of the
Magen Avot community

ראש השנה תשפ"א | ISSUE 2

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Contents

LETTERS

- 3 From the desk of the editor
- 4 The Chief Rabbi's Rosh Hashanah Message
- 5 Message from Rabbi Kenigsberg
- 6 Reflections from the Chairman
- 7 Message from the President of the US

UPDATES

- 8 Chessed Report
Update from the Women's officer
- 9 The 3-T Project
Y@MA Update
Nachas News
- 10 What we did in the lockdown
- 11 Kol Nidrei Appeal

FEATURES

- 12 A Life in the Day of Professor Dr L Lovat
- 14 A Life in the Day of a poet... Eve Grubin Brookes
- 17 The impact of African-American Rabbi Shais Rishon
- 19 Pandemics from history
- 21 The mental health impact of Covid-19
- 22 Book review - "Kaddish.com"

TEFILLA COMPANION

- 23 Message from the Chairs
Inspiration from an unlikely source
Rabbi Kenigsberg
- 25 Children's Corner
Ruth Ehreich
- 27 Teshuva: A Lawyer's Perspective
Paul Taylor
- 28 Prophetic Thoughts on Teshuva in our Prayers
Elkan Adler
- 31 The Akeidah - Kriat Hatorah for Second Day Rosh Hashanah
Dan Artman
- 33 Unesaneh Tokef
Daniel Greenberg
- 35 L'kale Orech Din
David-Hillel Ruben
- 37 Jonah and the Universal Experience of Being Swallowed by a Fish
Natan Maurer

ISSUE 2 | ראש השנה תשפ"א

Our Ethos:

- Modern, orthodox, inclusive community that is welcoming to all.
- Provision of opportunities for learning that are both intellectually and spiritually stimulating.
- Promotion of women's involvement and ways of making women feel included within halachic guidelines set out by the United Synagogue and Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis.
- Supportive of Israel and its national holidays.
- Involvement and encouragement of children and youth.

Find us at:

48 Finchley Lane, London NW4

Website: www.magenavot.com

Email: info@magenavot.com

Twitter: @MagenAvot

Facebook: [facebook.com/MagenAvot](https://www.facebook.com/MagenAvot)

WhatsApp - join our group by visiting:
<https://tinyurl.com/MAShul>

Rabbi's Email: rabbi@magenavot.com

Rabbi's Mobile: 07891 988 201
(also available via WhatsApp)

Designed by Raffi Maurer

From the desk of the editor

Our last Edition was prepared in some haste before Pesach and just before the Covid lockdown. I expressed the hope then that future editions would not be published under such unusual constraints.

We have much to be positive about since March 23rd. Our Shul is open - albeit with limitations - not least the absence of any Kiddush refreshment. Full lockdown is over - albeit with overseas travel curtailed, and day to day activities only cautiously resuming and... our Magazine is in printed as well as electronic form.

This year we are also incorporating a section dedicated to the Yomin Noraim- a companion to the Machzor -which is due in large measure to the efforts of Darren Abrahams and Melvin Kay.

It would be impossible to avoid mention of the Covid 19 crisis but I hope this Edition of Ha'Magen will have lifted our perspectives to wider horizons and a broader perspective beyond Coronavirus.

That said, readers will see evidence of the extraordinary efforts made by our Members- notably lead by Rabbi Kenigsberg and Rebbetzin Sarah -to engage with each other and the wider community. The range of online shiurim and Zoomed conferences was astonishing. From complex halachic issues



surrounding organ donation to laboratory produced meat, we were treated to debates lead by experts that proved illuminating and

thought provoking.

Beyond the outstanding devotion shown by our front line medical and health care professionals to those stricken by the virus, the outreach efforts of others to comfort and support members who were vulnerable and lonely has proved to be truly outstanding.

And as articles in this Magazine demonstrate, the simple efforts of Members to ease the worry and stress felt by our community and beyond has demonstrated true meaning of Tzdekah and Chessed to a remarkable degree. Simple words and deeds revealed the highest moral ideals. The virus brought out the very best in us.

My thanks to our contributors and those on the Editorial Committee whose efforts enabled us to compile this Edition. Special thanks to Fiona Taylor for her efforts and enthusiasm and to Raffi Maurer for his design and layout expertise.

This remains your Magazine.

With your continued involvement and support it will flourish.

Julian Pollard

Editor

The Chief Rabbi's Rosh Hashanah Message

As I reflect on an extraordinary year, my first thoughts are with those whose lives were tragically cut short by the Coronavirus.

May their memories be for a blessing and may their families find comfort in their sad loss. My heart goes out to the many whose health, whether physical or mental, has been affected and to those who are facing severe financial hardship or crises in their personal relationships. The restrictions on social interaction, abrupt changes to our routine and the grip of deep uncertainty have dramatically impacted the fabric of all of our lives in ways that we could never have imagined.

In the years to come, while many will admiringly recall our resilience and forbearance during these most trying of times, ultimately the success of our response to this Pandemic will be judged not by how we felt, but by how we acted.

The Torah portion of Nitzavim, which is always read immediately prior to Rosh Hashanah, commences with these words: “You are all standing this day before the Lord your God; your heads, your tribes (shivtechem), your elders and your officers”. In this list of national leaders, ‘tribes’ appears to be out of place.

Mindful of the fact that ‘shevet’ also means ‘staff’ or ‘sceptre’, our commentators explain that the leaders of our people are being referred to according to the item that they carried that symbolised their role. In the same way as ‘the Crown’ refers to the monarch and ‘First Violin’ refers to an orchestra’s lead musician, a person who leads is known by the instrument of that leadership.



The message that emerges is extremely powerful. You are defined by what you do. The essence of a person is measured according to what they have achieved. For this reason,

we call community leaders ‘machers’ (makers). ‘Macher’ is a role that conveys respect, because the people who change the world are not the dreamers and thinkers; the people who change the world are the ‘doers’.

On Yom Kippur, we read the book of Jonah, in which the prophet informs the inhabitants of Nineveh of their impending doom. In response, they fast and repent for their evil ways. The text captures that epic event in just a few words: “God saw their deeds”. Their words of apology and their fasting were merely steps towards a life-changing moment. What concerned God was not their protestations, but their actions.

This year, without any preparation whatsoever, every one of our communities was plunged into a crisis of unprecedented proportions. Your response has been simply magnificent.

With our Shuls closed, our communities redoubled their creativity and their altruism. We have never known such an outpouring of compassion, such acts of selfless care for the vulnerable and such generosity in charitable giving. I have no doubt that such action will remain at the heart of our Covid-19 response for as long as it takes us to overcome the dangers it presents to all of humankind. As we commence 5781, may Hashem inscribe and seal each and every one of us in the Book of Life, good health, peace and fulfilment.

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis
September 2020 • Ellul 5780



Message from Rabbi Kenigsberg

Dear Members and Friends of Magen Avot,

Yamim Noraim 5781 are likely to be the strangest that we have ever experienced.

6 months ago, many of us probably imagined that by Rosh Hashana things would long have returned to “normal”, yet we still find ourselves waiting and wondering when we will be able to do away with social distancing, self-isolation and shielding – phrases that many of us had never even heard of just under a year ago, and now are an all-too familiar part of our lexicon. As I write these words it is still uncertain just how our tefillot on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur will look. The only thing we do know is that they will be different to what we are used to.

A central theme of Rosh Hashanah is the frailty of man, the unpredictability of our days, and our utter and total dependence on Hashem. Although one could have been forgiven for thinking at times that some of the words of our prayers seemed antiquated and that they failed to reflect the scientific advancement and technological prowess of modern times, the last few months have shown us how true they still are. The words of the machzor which bring us face to face with our own vulnerability could not be more relevant.

Yet through our dependence we have also discovered our strength. I believe that over the past few months we have come together



as a community like never before. As we have said many times previously, even as our shul building was forced to close, our community remained connected.

In so many ways each one of you has contributed to support and strengthen, to engage and inspire.

Recreating the physical space of our community was always going to pose a challenge. It will require a further relaxing of restrictions before we are truly able to recapture the atmosphere of old, but we have already taken great strides. Just being back in shul has provided great comfort to many and it is my fervent hope that the Yamim Noraim services will provide another important milestone on the journey we all find ourselves on.

Thank you to Julian Pollard and the rest of the editorial committee for once again producing a publication of superb quality in record time. The continued growth of “HaMagen” is another success of the community at large. May it continue to go from strength to strength.

For those unable be back in shul for these auspicious days, we will certainly be together in heart, mind and spirit. I hope that this magazine and the adjoining Tefillah companion will help to provide you with a community feel and we look forward to davening together again in future years.

Wishing the entire community a ketiva ve'chatima tova.

Rabbi Kenigsberg

Reflections from the Chairman

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם, שֶׁחָזַרְתָּ בִּי נְשָׁמָתִי בְּחֻמְלָה; רַבָּה אֲמוּנָתְךָ.

I am thankful to You, living and eternal King, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me; Your faithfulness is great.

The first words we say every morning thanking Hashem for the gift of life. This has been a testing and difficult time. Whilst, compared to others, we have a lot to be grateful for, we still have a way to go before a new form of normal returns.

The efforts being made by so many here at Magen Avot to educate, encourage and bolster all of us is greatly appreciated. The events, speakers, activities, communication and so much more, handled and organised over the last 4 months by Rabbi Kenigsberg, all on the Executive and many on the Council, has been exceptional.

Although we have returned to davening in Shul, the need to be wearing masks, and not



being able to sing and join in with the davening, never mind no kiddushim or ability to be sociable in Shul, does make it more difficult, and isn't a great incentive to return.

The good news though for the Yamim Noraim is that we will be able to have a large marquee in the playground of the school, which will mean that with the side walls up we'll be able to daven without having to wear masks, and will be able to join in with the singing.

The 3-T inclusive project is inspirational. A source of communal growth throughout the summer leading up to the Yamim Noraim, based on Teshuva, Tefilah and Tzdaka. Our tefilla of וּנְתִנָּה תְּקוּף is climaxed by the verse, which we all proclaim as one: תְּשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וּצְדָקָה: מִעֲבִירֶיךָ אֶת רוּעַ הַגְּזֵרָה.

“Repentance, Prayer, and Charitable giving avert the severe decree.”

Shana Tova,
Simon Bentley (Chairman, Magen Avot)
simon@simonbentley.net

Michael Goldstein

President of the United Synagogue

The most powerful event in our nation's history is about to take place.

The morning sun rises. The Children of Israel are camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, clothes washed, expectant. The scene is set. They are ready to hear from God Himself. Thunder and lightning fill the air. A thick cloud envelops the mountain. Shortly it will smoke and quake. The people shudder.

But a close reading of the text shows that it wasn't the thunder, the lightning or the fire which cause them to tremble. Rather, נִקְלָה שֹׁפָר חָזָק מְאֹד – it is 'a very strong Shofar blast' (Exodus 19:16). This is the first mention of the word 'Shofar' in the Torah. And it provides a clue, I think, to why the hearing of the Shofar has resonated with Jews of all backgrounds for centuries.

Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the creation of the world. Mount Sinai is the anniversary of our covenant with God. The Shofar blasts of Rosh Hashanah echo the ones heard at the giving of the Torah. The Shofar focuses our minds and reminds us of our responsibilities as Jews to study, to pray and to make the world a better place.

This Rosh Hashanah will be one like no other. Many of us will still not be comfortable heading to shul, perhaps spending our first Rosh Hashanah away from synagogue in decades. To help, do look out for our new publication – Shana Tova! – arriving in the post soon and to be used whether you are in shul or at home. We've also teamed up with the publishers Koren to offer you a discount on the Rabbi Sacks Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur machzorim.

But if I can urge you to do one thing – safely – this



Rosh Hashanah, it is to hear the Shofar blasts. Our communities are organising Covid-secure blowings in shul, in youth and family programmes, in parallel

services and in open spaces (this year on second day only as first day falls on Shabbat).

This is not how we expected to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the United Synagogue. But Jews are the people of tikva, hope, and so even in times of crisis we look for the silver linings. I have never been more proud to be the President of the United Synagogue as I have this year. Our communities, led by dedicated Honorary Officers supported by many volunteers, have without fail, stepped up to combat the Coronavirus crisis. Our Rabbis and Rebbetzins have conducted pastoral visits and funerals at the most difficult of times. Through the United Synagogue Chesed department and our Community Care coordinators, 1,000 'Seder in a box' kits were delivered to isolated members ahead of Pesach.

The 'Shabbat in a box' initiative with three freshly-cooked meals has enabled those unable to put food on the table to celebrate Shabbat. Our communities have re-imagined themselves virtually and I have been struck by the extraordinary range of programmes our shuls have provided, including inspirational Kabbalat Shabbat services online. The United Synagogue's new video on-demand service, TheUS.tv, has attracted thousands of viewers and, more importantly, has kept people connected to their Judaism. These are our Shofar blasts: a call to our members that our communities are here for you.

At this most unusual of Jewish New Years, my sincere good wishes to you and your families.

Shana Tova.

Chessed Report

Magen Avot would like to thank the Chessed committee and all its volunteers for their incredible work over the last few months.

Chessed is a fundamental part of any community but the last few months with their unique challenges led to increased strain on many of our members.

Shoina Kass and David Berke together with the rest of the Chessed committee and many dedicated volunteers worked tirelessly to ensure that everyone who needed help received it.

It was so incredible to see how the offers to help kept coming in, even surpassing the numbers of those who required it. Prescriptions were collected and packages and shopping were



delivered.

Most importantly our members knew that they weren't in this alone.

We pray that we will never be put to a test like this again but we are proud of our community's response and grateful to all those who gave of themselves in these trying times.

particularly in our ability to engage with our women. I have therefore, together with our lovely Sarah Kenigsberg and Joy Kay arranged an interactive session which aimed to listen to women and address their concerns/ideas. Examples may include informal engagements that will enable the active participation of as many women as possible. 'I'm Passionate about...' will enable us to learn about other women's passions in an engaging way. Another planned event may be focused on music (theoretical and practical) where women can speak about their musical talents and perform.

Dear Magen Avot women,

I am keen to hear your thoughts, ideas, concerns, so that I will be able to address those and create an even more women-friendly environment within our community.

Please reach out to me.

Chaya Langerman

haya.langerman@gmail.com | 07779706873

Wishing you all a very happy and healthy New Year!

Update from the Women's officer

By Chaya Langerman

The focus of my role... as a women's officer is to represent the women in our community and act to ensure women's voice is heard and considered so that each woman feels an integral part of our community. Hosting women speakers on Shabbat mornings, introducing Eishet Chayil on Shabbat Beshalach, Simchat Torah breakfast for women with our own women delivering short speeches, social events with women such as baking demo evening, painting night with a women artist, mental health speaker (Fiona Taylor), establishing the WhatsApp Women's Group to create an informal channel of communication - are just some of the activities I have executed (with the help of many) to achieve this goal. Some of our fantastic programs such as Knead To Learn are currently on hold due to COVID restrictions but hope to resume in the future.

Yet, there is a lot still to achieve... COVID's reality introduced some significant challenges,

The 3-T Project

By Elkan Adler, Leader of the 3T Project

Magen Avot launched its 3T Project this year on Rosh Chodesh Av. The Project which will continue up until Yom Kippur, with activities related to the 3 Ts of Teshuva, Tefilla and Tzedaka.

Over the past few weeks, it has provided the Community with a spring board to come together and give a proactive and positive response to the uncertain and difficult times we are going through.

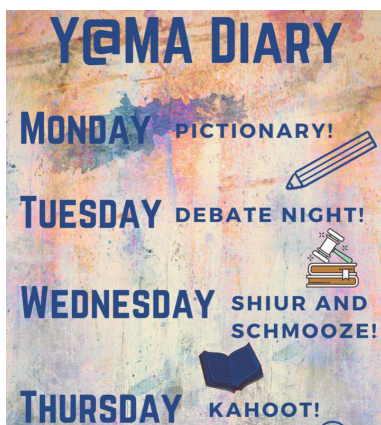
Under the umbrella of 3T, the community has compiled a cookbook of [25] budget recipes for GIFT families, sponsored tens of Rosh Hashana meals for needy families, organised a GIFT parcel

THE 3-T PROJECT



packing session, written a prayer companion, learnt Gemorah Rosh Hashana, participated in a series of 6 special shiurim from international and world class speakers and facilitated further individual learning sessions.

Special thanks to Rabbi and Sara Kenigsberg, Anouk Abrams, Barak Seener, Chaya Langerman, Daniel Ehreich, Darren Abrahams, Elliot Berke, Elkan Adler, Fiona Taylor, Mel Kay, Patti Adler and Raffi Maurer for supporting this project and to all the Community for making this a success and shining a little more light into our world.



Nachas News



Mazal Tov to **Joan and Julian Pollard** who were blessed with the birth in London in July of twin grandsons - Jesse (Yishai) and Isaac (Yitschak) and in August of a Grandson, Simcha, in Jerusalem.

Mazal Tov to **Julian Maurer and David Berke** on being honoured our Chatan Torah and Chatan Bereishit this year. We wish them and their families a hearty Mazal Tov!

Y@MA Update

Elliot Berke, Magen Avot Youth Director

Despite the tumultuous changes in the past few months, Y@MA have been able to maintain a strong presence online with 5 months of nightly activities, including quizzes, discussions, debates, games, challenges and more. The kids have really enjoyed the range of activities and there has been some great participation. I now look forward to restarting our virtual programming and I hope we will be able to have in-person activities at some point soon bH!

What we did in the lockdown...

We always knew how diverse the Magen Avot family is. Only now can we appreciate how caring are its members and how willing they are to give of their time and effort unconditionally to help others.

Here is one anonymous story of how the Coronavirus brought out the very best in us. The daily practice of acts of kindness has made a real and tangible difference to those in need of support and has hopefully cemented our community.

.....I drove an ambulance.

Last year, thanks to the Chessed Department of the United Synagogue, I volunteered to join the Ambulance Wish Foundation who provide end of life transport to patients seeking to fulfil their final wish. After basic first aid training I began to drive the Ambulance-emblazoned “donated by the Jewish Community”- and funded thanks to the efforts of Rebbetzen Kaplan formerly of the HGS Synagogue. We were unable to use the ambulance for final wish duties so we teamed up with Compassion London to collect and distribute food across the capital for several charities.



Cooked meals have been prepared at various locations ie Wembley Stadium, Allianz Stadium and now Alexandra Palace with supermarkets, especially Morrisons, provide huge quantities of fruit, vegetables, tinned goods, confectionary etc.

Initially we provided cooked meals and other food to major London hospitals for keyworkers, doctors and nurses. Later this was expanded to children’s hospices, food banks, asylum seeker hostels and even mosques. We delivered several hundred cooked meals each day to the Finsbury Park Mosque where “the Jewish Ambulance” deliveries were invariably greeted with a “Bless you brother” as we pulled in.

At the height of the pandemic, I passed the Dalston Mosque in Shackwell Lane (formerly a Synagogue funded by the Rothschilds) where coffins were piled up outside and a temporary morgue had been set up in the car park. It was a dreadful sight. Some weeks later while delivering food parcels to the Mosque I fell into conversation with the

local undertaker who happened to be there. He reminded me that the Mosque had previously been a shul, that his wife was Jewish and her parents had been married there. He observed that we should all work together and ignore the extremists who seek to divide us. I couldn’t agree with him more.

We undertake weekly deliveries for the United Synagogue to lonely or infirm and elderly members in East London. Their support systems are very limited and many have dropped off the radar as communities shrink and shuls close. One woman in her 80’s greeted me at the threshold of her council flat in a large run down tenement block and told me she had not been out for 10 weeks. Would I like to come in and meet her son? I hesitated but agreed only to find her 50 year old son was bed ridden and wholly dependent on her.

One day after a delivery to the Royal Marsden Hospital I was diverted to Leicester Square to collect “some chocolate” from M&M’s HQ store.

We arrived to find a pallet of some 250kg of chocolate Easter Eggs which found happy homes at various children’s hospices.

During the recent crisis we delivered some 50,000 meals.

The remarkable emergence of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of pop up self help groups to collect, parcel and distribute food

to an increasingly number of families across the country, is testimony to the spirit of selfless goodwill so many have shown in these difficult times. The sight of families queuing round the block at food banks and community centres for food parcels demonstrates how urgent is the need. The sight of the “Jewish ambulance” draws attention in the streets from the public who clap (as they did for the NHS) or simply show a thumbs up. It also helps to indicate to ethnic communities, who may rarely come into contact with the Jewish community, that we care too.



Kol Nidrei Appeal

Magen Avot are running our own appeal this year, enabling us to distribute the much needed funds for our designated charities as soon as possible.

ISRAEL CHARITY | **Batmelech**

www.batmelech.org/?lang=en

Provides support, physical shelter, mental support and legal support for orthodox Israeli women. This is a group often discouraged from seeking help outside of their social sphere. In the pressurised environment of lockdown, domestic violence has spiked. Batmelech, with an understanding of the Orthodox world, are the people to whom these women feel comfortable to turn to.

UK CHARITY | **WST** www.wstcharity.com

A North West London charity who deal sensitively with Jewish families in dire financial straits. They assist at times of hardship, and if possible, aim to address the root causes of hardship by referring to specialist charities for a longer-term resolution.

WST Charity Ltd was established in 1990, (originally as Woodstock Sinclair Trust), aiming to assist local low-income working families struggling to make ends meet. It has since grown steadily to satisfy increasing needs, funded by voluntary donations. In the last financial year, WST distributed £1.5m+ to local needy families.

MAGEN AVOT CAUSE | **Y@MA**

With attendance increasing steadily since the inception of the Youth program, the challenge

of Covid-19 was met by holding regular and stimulating online events. Keeping youth involved and interested, keeps us all on our toes. New and innovative projects are planned. We are the today, but our youth are our tomorrow.

STUDENT CHARITY | **University Jewish Chaplaincy**

www.mychaplaincy.co.uk

As students return to universities, Chaplaincy has greater importance than ever. In the campus world of uncertainty, confusion, and often disturbing and radical input, University Jewish Chaplaincy support young Jews, and provide them a home from home.

Please give generously. Your money will help many people and for some may be a literal lifesaver.

MAKE A DONATION

Suggested donations: £30 | £60 | £120 | £250 | £500 | £1,000 | £2,500

By credit card:

Call Daniella (Magen Avot US administrator) on 07341002798. Leave a message and she will call you back.

By cheque to: Magen Avot

c/o United Synagogue
305 Ballards Lane
London N12 8GB

By bank transfer:

Sort code: 60 80 07 | Account number: 60217278
Account name: Magen Avot United Synagogue

Charity voucher companies:

Instructions to the Charity company to make payment to the Magen Avot United Synagogue account detailed above.



Wishing our customers a Shana Tova!

Pomegranate London Broil

Mix together:

- 1 Tablespoon Sumac
- 1 teaspoon Pepper
- 1 teaspoon Salt

Sprinkle over both sides of 2lb London Broil, in an oven safe (if possible hob safe) dish

Leave for 15 minutes.

Broil in the oven for 5 minutes on each side.

Take out of dish and leave to one side.

In the same dish on the hob sautee in:

- 1 Tablespoon Oil
- 1 medium Shallot, diced for a few minutes.

Add:

1/3 Cup Sweet Red/White Wine (or 1/3 Cup Water with 1 Tablespoon Onion Soup Mix)

Simmer for a few minutes and add any meat juices that have collected on the plate holding the cooked London Broil.

Stir in:

- 1/3 Cup Pomegranate Molasses
- 1 teaspoon Lemon Juice

Turn off heat.

Slice the London Broil and lay on top of the sauce.

Serve on a bed of rocket or other leaves with a drizzle of the sauce over the top and sprinkle with fresh pomegranate seeds.

Enjoy and Shana Tova!

A Life In The Day Of...

Professor Dr Laurence Lovat

Dr. Laurence B Lovat is Professor of Gastroenterology and Biophotonics at UCL and Consultant Gastroenterologist at UCLH. He qualified at UCL having intercalated in Nutrition with first class honours. He won a Medical Research Council research training fellowship to do his PhD. His research now focuses on developing optical tools for managing pre-cancerous changes in Barrett's oesophagus.

Over 2000 patients have taken part in his clinical trials. He has lectured in 10 countries, served on the oesophageal and research committees of the British Society of Gastroenterology, Imaging & Advanced Technology Committee of the American Gastroenterology Association, and is a specialist advisor to NICE.

Ha'Magen caught up with him as he was taking a short well earned holiday break after an intense few months.

Julian: Before we examine your present work, can you tell us about your formative years. Where were you raised and describe your family environment?

Laurence: I was born and raised in Southgate and both my parents and my brother qualified as dentists. At 16 I was cajoled by my parents to see the Professor of Dentistry at UCL and confessed that dentistry was not probably not for me. He immediately concurred and supported my ambition to study medicine. In Southgate I was active in Jewish and Zionist youth groups- I ran the local Bnei Akiva Group and taught in the cheder

Julian: What brought you to Medicine and the speciality in which you currently work?

Laurence: I entered the School of Medicine at UCL and already had the idea of making Aliya. I made a tentative approach to enter Hadassah in Jerusalem but this would have been part of a programme involving me serving for 5 years as a junior doctor in the Israeli army after my studies and I decided the time was not right. I have harboured a wish to make Aliya for much of my life but so far this has



not happened. My life and family are here – and so am I at the moment.

Julian: And then you met Linda?

Laurence: We had met informally on several occasions in groups with others but one day we found ourselves travelling by car to a Simcha in Leeds and four hours together made me realise she was the one for me. At the time I was living in a small apartment in Kensington and she was from Mill Hill. I moved to Hendon and we married in March 1991 (almost 30 years ago now!). We joined the North Hendon Adass

Community which we found welcoming and non judgmental. Many young married families were attracted to the kehilla. We spent 10 happy years there.

Julian: How was your career developing?

Laurence: I had qualified at UCL and took an intercalated BSc in nutrition and then took a PhD in a rare protein disorder. No one else had undertaken such study and, by accident rather than design, I became one of the few who knew much about this disorder. Indeed it is a pattern of my life that I have let life carry me to realms of study and research which were rarely planned but which have given me huge pleasure and satisfaction.

I was reluctant to become tied down to the rather predictable life of general practice – which I had contemplated at one stage-or that of a lackey to a hospital professor. I always wanted to experience hands on medicine. So I spent some months in India seeing medicine in action there before a trekking holiday in Nepal. In the UK I spent time in outer London suburban NHS hospitals in Hillingdon ,Chase Farm and this helped me focus on the two areas I wished to concentrate on- Cardiology or Gastro-Enterology. The latter won out.

Julian: What satisfaction does your work deliver?

Laurence: I love the diversity of the type of patients I meet every day and feel it a real honour to serve

them. This may sound trite but I treat the poorest, most vulnerable individuals as well as the very rich and famous. This diversity hopefully makes me very grounded and appreciative of the common thread of humanity we doctors must provide to every patient- each is entitled to the same respect and devotion. I also love the opportunity to jump in and treat a patient urgently (and perhaps never see them again] but also establishing very long term relationships with those having chronic conditions.

Julian: And your area of specialisation now?

Laurence: I am deeply involved in novel endoscopic approaches to prevent oesophageal cancer. I am particularly focussed on obtaining earlier diagnosis as this will increase survival chances materially and we are also improving diagnostic techniques - making them less intrusive and more effective. I am currently leading a national trial on 2500 patients and I think we may save their lives in 40% of the cases. Earlier diagnosis and surgery will improve life expectancy and save the NHS precious resources long term

Julian: And modern technology is helping?

Laurence: Very much so. We are using Artificial Intelligence to detect pre cancerous tissues in the oesophagus and now in the bowel also and using Big Data to examine where and how we may be taking the wrong path as our clinical trials progress. After a tragic family loss I learned how care homes were misdiagnosing symptoms of patients with disastrous consequences. So working with an Israeli university data science group we are now perfecting a set of diagnostic tools which will identify at risk patients long before their health deteriorates fatally – with a 90% accuracy rate! These predictive tools will become increasingly important in tandem with personalised treatment directed to the (sometimes unique) circumstances of the patient

Julian: How did Covid affect you?

Laurence: Again, as with much of my career, chance played a hand. A junior colleague of mine had been appointed Critical Care Director for England and was suddenly thrown into sourcing ventilators for the UK. She came to me for help and I found myself as the UK lead of an international clinical pharmaceutical trial of some 30,000 health care workers – how and why were they at higher risk of covid and how can this be prevented. Life led me down a path I had never planned.

Julian: Describe a typical day for you.

Laurence: As you can see , there is no such thing for me. But I still see patients almost every day of the week.

Julian: What book or books do you have at your bedside?

Laurence: I do not usually have a lot of time for reading but I try to undertake some Jewish study every day if I can and I am working through the Smiley books of John Le Carre and the Amos Oz autobiography. I have never been a TV watcher but the Covid lockdown has enabled me to discover the delights of “the Crown” and “Shtisel”. But best of all I have enjoyed the wonderful weather in our garden and the proliferation of flowers, herbs and many vegetables has been curiously satisfying.

Julian: What is your greatest sense of satisfaction?

Laurence: [without hesitation] My family. I am blessed with 5 sons and a daughter and now three grandchildren. I am extremely proud of all of them and they have all enjoyed academic and professional success- in Medicine, Dentistry, Bio-chemistry and one is a Rabbi and Actuary

Rapid fire questions:

Q: Lazy Sunday morning in bed reading the papers or brisk walk?

A: I like reading the papers and Linda is the keen walker, but I enjoy that too.

Q: Hendon or Herzliya?

A: Jerusalem!

Q: Chateaubriand steak or fish and chips?

A: Fish and chips.

Q: Philip Roth or Jeffrey Archer?

A: Thats a hard one...

Q: “Save save save” or “spend spend spend”?

A: Save - of course!

Q: Dinner with the Queen or breakfast with Angelina Jolie?

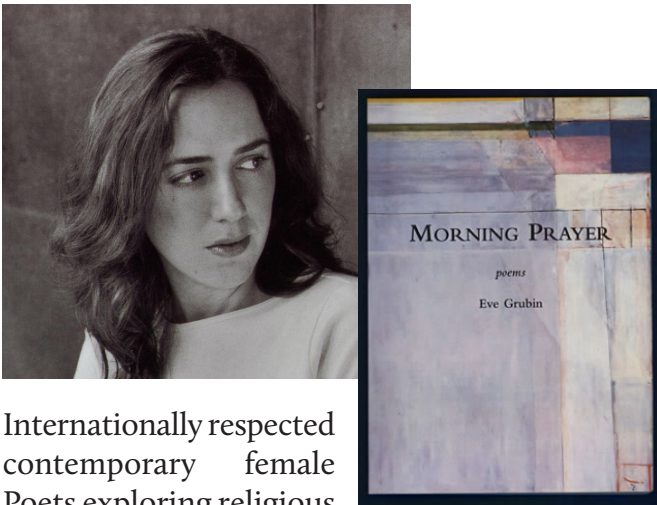
A: The Queen any day!

The lasting impression Professor Lovat gives is one of boundless enthusiasm, and constant striving to explore new medical horizons while remaining wholly grounded in the delights of family and community. If life has “lead him” down the path he has found and not vice versa - he nonetheless seems to have derived great contentment and satisfaction in where he has been lead.

Interview conducted by Julian Pollard.

A life in the day of a poet...

Eve Grubin Brookes



Internationally respected contemporary female Poets exploring religious themes - especially those living in London - are rarer than hen's teeth. Ha'Magen was delighted and honoured to have had the opportunity to engage with **Eve Grubin Brookes** recently. Eve was interviewed by **Fiona Taylor**.

American by birth, Eve currently lives in north west London, is a member at Magen Avot and recently published a new pamphlet of poems entitled *The House of Our First Loving*.

She observes:- "I was boosted when Publisher's Weekly gave the book a positive review. PW gives almost everyone positive reviews, but it still meant something to me. Since then, I have been reviewed mostly in Jewish publications, which is fine, but I don't want to be pigeon-holed as a "Jewish poet."

She is unusual, even among contemporary Jewish poets, in that her poems engage with religious tradition in a serious and highly erudite fashion. She draws on Biblical, Talmudic and Jewish liturgical sources with the same fluency that she channels poets like Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop. Like her first book of poems, *Morning Prayer*, the poems in her new pamphlet draw on a variety of Jewish themes.

For many, religion represents a worldview focused on a unified world brought into being by, and under the providence of, a unitary Divine being. However, Eve's understanding of Judaism is one in which concepts like broken shards and blank spaces are central.

Q: Can you tell us about your relationship with poetry?

A: A formative moment was when my father showed me 'The Tyger' by William Blake when I was about eight years old. You probably know the poem. Here is the first stanza:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

My child self could see the fierce, 'fearful' tiger, its bright orange fur and black stripes, in a night forest. And this poem introduced me to the word 'symmetry', which is a beautiful word, itself almost symmetrical. I remember being able to enjoy the poem without fully understanding it. That's the secret to connecting to poetry—to allow a poem to wash its music and images over you without struggling to grasp all of its meanings. Later, when you have time, you can analyse it. You have a lifetime to do this.

Q: What did you do with your love for poetry?

A: I read and read. But I only began writing in my twenties when I found out about contemporary poets (such as Sharon Olds, Lucille Clifton and Stanley Kunitz). I didn't realize that poets still existed! I tentatively started writing my own poems. When I met poet Marie Howe at Sarah Lawrence where I studied for my Masters in poetry she said, 'You need to eat poetry for breakfast, lunch and dinner.' I followed her advice.

Q: What were you doing for work while you were eating poetry?

A: Before moving to London from New York, I worked as the programs director of the Poetry Society of America. After my first book of poems, *Morning Prayer*, was published, I began teaching poetry at The New School and The City University of New York. I loved talking about poetry with my students, and it was such an honour meeting poets and writing introductions to their readings. And I felt that poetry helped

people. One of my favourite lines about poetry is something I heard Lucille Clifton once say: 'Poetry comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.'

Q: What happened with your poetry life when you moved to London?

A: When I moved continents, I brought my love of poetry with me. I got a job teaching creative writing at New York University in London and I became a tutor at The Poetry School. And I did some teaching in the Jewish community: at LSJS, Limmud and other places. At the same time, I was writing, and I published *The House of Our First Loving*.

Q: How has your Jewish life connected to your poetry life?

A: In New York, after publishing *Morning Prayer*, I took a hiatus, continuing to write but not as prolifically. At this time, I was immersing myself in Jewish texts. I could see that I might bring what I was learning to my poetry, but I also was forming a new love: learning Torah and the commentaries. I studied at various places in New York, including Drisha, and I also went to Israel and studied at Midreshet Rachel. Many of the poems I write now engage with Jewish texts and thought.

Q: And your research?

A: I am now working on a new book of poems that is linked to my PhD thesis on the nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson. My research is on Dickinson's 'poetics of reticence'. I argue that the unsaid is what makes her poems so powerful and that the reticence in her poems comes from her reading of the Bible, which she sees as a text with gaps and silences.

Q: What's your favourite part of your work?

A: I once heard the late American poet and writer Grace Paley say something like: poets need wandering time, they need some moments in the day to think and wander and look around. These opportunities are rare! But when they are available, I love the moments when I have the house to myself, even if it's only for just a few minutes, to look around and think. And then I turn to my folder of poems. It's wonderful to have begun a poem and to tinker with it, edit, add to it and take away unnecessary words. I imagine

that it's like chipping away at a sculpture. You see something emerging, something solid is formed, and it's wet and fresh and raw.

Q: What is your least favourite part of your work?

A: It's very difficult to begin a poem. Almost scary. I sometimes feel like I will never write another poem and that it's impossible to write. Then I feel stuck.

Q: What's your passion or hobby that makes you happy?

A: Reading to our children. I just finished reading a series of books—profound yet with a light touch—to our eight-year-old by the classic American writer, Edward Eager. Also, I am re-learning to play the guitar.

Q: Do you have a hero or someone who inspires you?

A: So many people have inspired me. We are surrounded by heroes. Emily Dickinson for her passion for poetry and love for her friends. Other heroes are Avivah Zornberg and Deborah Lipstadt. I have many family members that I look up to. During my time in London, my late father-in-law began writing poetry and was extremely prolific, producing poems almost daily when he became ill. This was a great source of inspiration for me.

Q: What achievements are you proud of?

A: I can't believe that I have published books, have jobs teaching poetry and got married and have children! How did I manage to do all those things at once? I did not think it would be possible.

Rapid fire questions:

Q: Sourdough or Doughnuts?

A: Sourdough. (Made by NRPS mother Charlotte Cliff. My family especially loves the pizza dough.)

Shabbat afternoon: reading or sleeping? Both!

Q: New York Times or The Times?

A: The New York Times. What's The Times? (New Yorkers will never know or read any other paper...)

Q: Whisky of the week or G and T?

A: Neither. Bleuch! (Full disclosure: I didn't know what G&T was, and I had to ask).

Q: Artscroll or Koren?

A: Both. (I'd like to mention here a quirk about Artscroll that my Palaeographer husband pointed out to me: the font that ArtScroll chose for the covers of many of their books, such as the distinctive round-backed 'd' in 'Siddur', is based on the script used for early medieval Christian manuscripts. I wonder if the publishers are aware of that?).

Regarding the Artscroll vs Koren question: each have made Jewish texts accessible to non-fluent Hebrew speakers which has been a tremendous blessing for the Jewish community. I can't not mention here that we just lost Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz who produced the ground-breaking modern Hebrew translation of the Talmud which Koren recently published in English.

I am reminded of Blake's poem 'The Tyger' I mentioned, which wonders how and why the Divine created the tiger; on an implicit level, Blake's poem embodies an awe of creation in general—creation might include translating a mighty text such as the Talmud, raising children, or writing poetry.

We conclude by reference to Eve's own poetry. In her first book of poetry, she explores the ways in which reticence, or the act of withholding gratification or fulfilment, translates into greater longing and desire. As she writes in the title poem of *Morning Prayer*:

“It's not faith, it's faltering.

Less happiness than the laws.

It's not survival.

It's the battle, desire and modesty, the name.

Near.

Not near; awe.”

For her, longing is, in some way, the essence of Judaism and is equally, if not more central than the fulfilment of that longing. In the magnificent poem “*Jerusalem*,” she contrasts a post-redemption religious vision with the earth-bound legality of the Rabbis. The notion that the redemption of our world is yet to come, and depends on our actions, is foundational to Judaism:

“Keep me close to the flaw, to the cracked soil.

Don't let me fly up again; keep me living
Inside the laws, and the lightning, planted
and learning, leaning into this difficult field.”

Just as a viewer might be drawn to the unfinished patches of canvas at an art exhibition, Eve sees a spiritual opportunity in the “cracked soil” of our world. Flaws and incompleteness are what keep the speaker tethered to the earth and to her faith.

In a new poem entitled “*Unfinished*,” she specifically connects this sensibility to the notion of *zecher l'churban* in particular. In this poem, the speaker suggests that incompleteness, while frustrating at times, may be a tie that binds a husband and wife to one another, and moreover may stimulate a longing for a greater religious redemption. “Who needs finality,” she asks “when unfinishing creates a longing for what has not yet happened?” While our incompleteness in an exilic, post-*Churban* world is painful and discomfiting, appreciating that incompleteness is an intrinsic part of Judaism and of the Jewish religious personality.

Unfinished

My husband has trouble finishing things.

When he washes the dishes

he leaves at least one pot in the sink and a few
pieces of silverware.

He says that my writing about this
may constitute *lashon hara*, speaking negatively
about others.

‘Not finishing things is *zecher l'churban*,’ he adds,
a way of remembering the destruction of the
Temple

which stood in Jerusalem nearly two-thousand
years ago.

Now he's in the other room making the bed,
which will look lovely

except for a few untucked corners, a pillow
askew,

strange for a man who is slightly OCD, who
can't bear a slanted piece of paper on my desk.

Yesterday, he almost finished his article on
Ælfric's use of Latin in Old English prose,
and he began one of the tasks on his list of
things to do.

Who needs finality when unfinishing creates a
longing for what has not yet happened?

Another perspective...

The impact of African-American Rabbi Shais Rishon

Shais Rishon, Rabbi, Kehilat Ir Chadash.

The extraordinary events across the world and particularly in the USA concerning the legacy of slavery cannot escape our notice. It has become a topic of heated political discussion and some dramatic demonstrations—even violence. It is therefore timely that we look at this issue through the prism of our own Jewish community. The rise to prominence of one Rabbi – Shais Rishon – has sharpened the debate.

Rishon was born February 14, 1982 in Brooklyn, New York to a black Jewish family associated with the Chabad-Lubavitch movement. According to him, his mother's ancestors descended from Igbo Jews in Nigeria (worthy of a story all to itself) and have been practicing Jews since the 1780s, when family tradition says their ancestors were Nigerian Jews captured and brought to America as slaves. While his father, Asher Rishon, converted to Judaism in the 1980s.

Growing up, he felt alienated from the Jewish community due to his race and the treatment he received from other Jews. He attended Brooklyn College where he majored in English. He began blogging about his black and Jewish identities as “MaNishtana” in 2009. He writes about racism within the Jewish community, and works as a content manager for Bend The Arc, a progressive Jewish organization focused on social justice. He also serves as rabbi for the New City Minyan, an Orthodox congregation in New City, New York—close to the Chareidi enclave of Monsey.

He is that rare combination in an Orthodox rabbi – a blogger, graphic artist, and public speaker and a social activist – the later more by chance than choice. He is comfortable wading into the thickets of obscure citations from both commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch and 1980s Marvel Comics.

As “MaNishtana” he entered the blogosphere in 2009 with a mission to nurture unity and



strengthen multifaceted identity within the **Jew of Color** (or “JOC”) community. The pseudonym “MaNishtana” is inspired by the first of the Four Questions of the Passover seder, “Mah nishtana halayla hazeh mikol haleilot? What makes this night different from all other nights?” with the intent to invoke the question with regards to Jews of Color “Why is this Jew different from all other Jews?.” The answer to this loaded question, according to MaNishtana, is “Everything and nothing.”

His unique, humorous, and often irreverent outlook on Judaism, race politics, and racial issues within Judaism and without—illustrated through his blogs and videos—have gained popularity through multiple press mentions, as well as earning his inclusion on The Jewish Week’s “36 Under 36” list for 2014. His speaking engagements have included Boston University, the University of Kentucky, and the Eliezer Society at Yale University. In 2010 MaNishtana launched the first online dating site catering to Jews of Color, Mosaic Matches, and in 2014 he founded the multi-culturally Jewish online magazine, JN Magazine. His books include *Thoughts From A Unicorn: 100% Black. 100% Jewish. 0% Safe* (2012), “Fine, thanks. How are YOU, Jewish?”: *A Stream Of Consciousness Stroll Through The Jew Of Color Mind* (2014), and *The Rishoni Illuminated Legacy Hagadah* (2015).

In 2020, Rishon and rapper Yitz Jordan (Y-Love) announced plans to create a Jewish Community Center specifically for Jews of Color. The community center would be open to all Jews, but focused on Jews of Color, and would build bridges both within the Jewish community and between Jews of Color and other minorities.

Works

His semi autobiographical novel *Ariel Samson, Freelance Rabbi* was a finalist for the 2018 National Jewish Book Award's Goldberg Award for Debut Fiction. In it he hoped to challenge stereotypes about Jews of Color, and make a place for them in the larger Jewish community.

Personal life

Rishon lives in Manhattan with his wife, Guliene Rollins-Rishon, and their daughter, who was born in late 2013. His wife is a biracial Jew and a descendant of Rabbi Yom-Tov Lipman Heller. Heller (c. 1579 –1654), was a Bohemian rabbi and Talmudist, best known for writing a commentary on the Mishnah called the Tosefet Yom-Tov (1614–1617). Heller was one of the major Talmudic scholars in Prague and in Poland during the "Golden Age" before 1648.

Shais Rishon observes that when one thinks of American Jewish literature, virtually no Jews of color come to mind — as characters or authors. “We’re invisible, pretty much” So in “*Ariel Samson: Freelance Rabbi*,” the main character, Ariel, is a 20-something black rabbi navigating life and work in the New York Jewish community while attempting to reconcile his identities. Rishon, says many of the racist experiences Ariel faces within the Jewish community are either based on his own life or stories told to him by other Jews of color.

Often, he says, works by black-Jewish authors and artists are seen as reflecting only the African-American experience and not the Jewish one.

Rishon says he has received threatening and angry messages in response to his writing about racism in the Jewish community. He uses a pseudonym in order to shield his family and friends from the backlash. In recent years, Jewish organizations have increasingly focused on embracing and highlighting diversity within their own communities, but Rishon says plenty remains to be done. “I would say it’s just now starting to move in baby steps away from tokenization,” he says.

Rishon sees his novel as one step in that direction. “I’m so excited to write this, so there is no confusion,” he says. “I’m an African-American author, yes, and a Jewish-American author, yes — both. To put the Jew of color entry

into Jewish American fiction.”

“How are you Jewish?” he frequently is asked. To which he responds:

“Fine, thanks. How are YOU, Jewish?”

The pain of being told again and again, both explicitly and implicitly, that he doesn’t look Jewish is part of why Rabbi Rishon has moved away from the Chabad community where he was raised, though he has kept many Jewish practices specific to Chabad. He describes the New City Minyan as modern Orthodox.

“I believe in and enjoy the ideology of Chabad, the inclusion and reaching out and accepting people,” he said. “Where it sort of loses me is the practical application. If you’re approaching people and trying to bring them close to observance, are you asking if they’re Jewish? What rubric are you using to decide if they’re Jewish? Chabad often ends up ignoring Jews of color or even pushing them away.

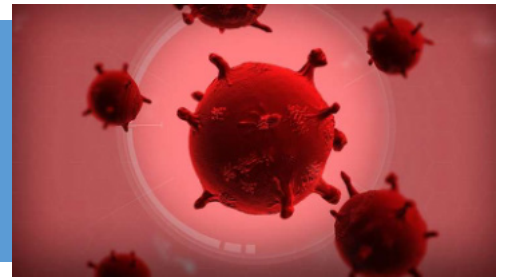
“A few years ago I was taking a train home. A Chabad student comes by, hands me a b’nei noach card that explains the seven Noachide mitzvot required of non-Jews. I told him: ‘You’re able to tell me I’m not Jewish just by looking at me? Do you realize that if I was somebody who was struggling with my faith right now, this would be the last straw?’”

So, how many Jews of color are there in America? “Jews of color have been historically underrepresented,” Rabbi Rishon says. “People who are trying to count Jews look for Jews who look like what they think Jews look like, or have a Jewish-sounding last name. Even with that underrepresentation, Jews of color make up eight to 10 percent of American Jewry. We’re a good hunk of the American Jewish community.”

In New City he is leading a group of people “who are either observant or becoming more observant. The group aims for weekly services on Friday night and Shabbat morning, as well as on holidays. “We pulled off our second Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. It’s a good feeling.”

The congregation generally meets in members’ homes. “We’re a speakeasy minyan,” he said. He would love for it to have a permanent home. “We’re really trying to find a way for it to be sustainable,” he said.

We've been here before Pandemics from history



By way of historical perspective Covid is just another pandemic in a long line of many previous epidemics or pandemics - most of them much more catastrophic in nature and human and economic consequences. The causes are many (where actually known) and most were invariably untreatable.

Records prove that pandemics date from at least 5000 years ago and almost certainly long before that. We know that a deadly epidemic in China around 3000 BCE ravaged a large region and wiped out the local population of all ages who were speedily buried in mass graves.

In Western Europe the Greek and Roman Empires fared even worse. The Antonine Plague (165-180 AD) may have been smallpox based and disseminated by Roman soldiers returning to their homes across the Empire after victorious campaigns. Perhaps 5 million succumbed in all and after 180 AD the Roman hold on their Empire weakened and instability grew until it collapsed.

The Plague of Cyprian (named after the Bishop of Carthage who described the epidemic as the end of the world) (250-271 AD) accounted for 5000 Roman citizens per day at its peak. Three hundred years later the Plague of Justinian (bubonic in type) ravaged the Byzantine Empire recurring periodically and seeing off at least 10% of the population.

The most devastating plague was of course the Black Death (1346-1353 AD) which travelled from Asia to Europe killing possibly half the population of Europe, changing its economic, cultural, political and religious outlook irrevocably and permanently. The workforce being decimated, cheap labour was no longer available and technical innovation resulted.

This plague was also catastrophic for the Jews of Europe who were scape-goated and hundreds of villages were destroyed and thousands murdered in this the most notorious (but not the last) blood libel.

Utterly catastrophic viral Hemorrhagic fever (a variant of Salmonella, it is thought) killed an estimated 15 million natives of Mexico and Central America in the Cocolitzli Epidemic (1545-8 AD).

At the same time Western explorers brought European diseases to the America which it is thought killed off 90% of the native populations especially the Aztecs and Incas. Indigenous groups were so decimated that they were unable to oppose the much smaller conquering invaders.



The Leith Plague of 1645

We are all familiar with the Great Plague of London (1665-6) which spread rapidly through the capital killing off about 100,000 victims and which was largely contained by the Great Fire in September 1666 which during a four day conflagration destroyed the City area but staunched the transmission of the plague from infected rodents.

The costume of a plague doctor featured an all-leather ensemble, a beak-like mask stuffed with



burning herbs, and a top hat — which signaled that the person was, in fact, a doctor. The plague doctor's uniform was designed to protect him from contamination... too bad it didn't

Further plague outbreaks in Marseille (1720-3) brought by infested cargo accounted for another 100,000 deaths. In Moscow (1770-2) the population were quarantined and then rioted. The Archbishop who entreated his flock not to gather for prayer, was murdered. About 100,000 died from the plague and many thousands more from the insurrection that followed being led by an imposter who claimed to be Peter III (the previously executed husband of Empress Catherine the Great).

Yellow fever carried by mosquitoes seized Philadelphia in 1793 (then the US Capital). Officials erroneously believed that slaves were immune so abolitionists called for the slaves to be recruited to nurse the sick. By the time the winter icy chills killed off the mosquitoes and the plague ended, 5000 had died.

The first major pandemic of the modern industrial age (the Flu Pandemic 1889-90) revealed how new transport links allowed the influenza to spread and wreak havoc. In just five weeks its peak mortality was reached and in months it had spread across the globe and had accounted for 1 million deaths.

A polio epidemic in New York City (1916) spread across the nation and accounted for 6000 deaths and the permanent disability of many thousands (probably including the future President Franklin Roosevelt).

But the greatest epidemic of all (The "Spanish" Flu 1918-1920) incredibly affected some 500 million from the South seas to the North Pole and deaths are estimated to have claimed at

least 75 million lives. Spain was neutral in the First World War and its press freely published early accounts of the illness so it was falsely believed the illness was specific to Spain. Poor nutrition and cramped insanitary conditions resulted, incredibly, in more soldiers dying from the virus than the bullet.

The Asian Avian Flu pandemic (1957-8) again originated in China and claimed at least 1 million lives around the world.

AIDS (Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome) began in 1981 changed the lives of millions of gay men across the world and claims lives even today- possibly 35 million in total - but with many millions more now living with the disease. Just a couple of victims have been cured.

Swine flu (2009-2010) originated in Mexico, spread across the globe and claimed between 150,000-575,000 lives (estimates vary) and unusually most were in the under 65 age group. Ebola (West Africa 2014-2016 and 2020) has no cure and a high mortality rate and death toll of some 11,000. Zika Virus (2015-date) is spread by mosquitoes and while not harmful to adults or children can infect children in the womb

It is too early to determine where Covid 19 will rank but at the date of writing (July 2020) there have been 15m confirmed cases worldwide of which nearly 6m have recovered but 525,000 have succumbed. Some countries are less than honest in the numbers they make public and the epidemic has not been played out.

However by way of context one should remember the shocking fact that some statisticians calculate that Malaria has claimed more human lives than any other causes combined.

Some even claim that this disease killed half the people who have ever lived.

Elimination of the humble but deadly mosquito seems to remain a priority of the highest importance.

The mental health impact of Covid-19

**By Karen Wilson,
Marketing & Communications Manager, Jami**

Rosh Hashanah this year will be very different for many of us. Shul will be different, family gatherings may be different, and certainly our outlook on everyday life will be very different to that of last year. We can't help but reflect on the past six months and how we have had to create a 'new normal', but what about the impact living through a pandemic has on our mental health?

We are living in unprecedented times and anxiety is a normal reaction to self-isolation and lockdown for an extended period. Whilst the situation is difficult for anybody with good mental health, for people already living with mental illness the additional stress and isolation can become a matter of life and death.

Jami is now, more than ever, a lifeline to anyone in the UK Jewish community affected by poor mental health. With the onset of Covid-19, looking after our mental as well as our physical health remains vital.

When restrictions were first placed on social interactions, necessitating the closure of Jami's Head Room Café and community hubs, it removed the only regular social contact many people using our services had with the wider community. As the period of isolation continued, so did the impact on those people already dealing with mental health issues as well as for the whole community.

At Jami we witnessed an increase in demand for our support and services. Our aim during this period was to ensure that people living with mental illness and their families had somewhere to turn to for vital social interaction and reassurance, and essential practical and emotional support.

It was crucial that we continued to offer

Jami

The Mental Health Service for our Community

people opportunities to connect with other individuals and with their local community, through doorstep chats, extensive telephone befriending and online group activities. We created online weekly programmes for those that would normally use our hubs or drop in to Head Room Café, with Peer Support Worker led sessions – people who use their lived experience of mental illness to support others – as well as professional staff and volunteer led groups aimed at socialisation, fitness, wellbeing and creative activity.

Our redeployed staff delivered over a thousand meals and doorstep chats to those most at risk, along with tablets and tech for people without, so they were able to access online support. One recipient said, "It makes me feel that someone is there for me, that someone will know if anything is wrong with me, makes me feel loved and cared about."

One-to-one sessions moved online focussing on individual recovery plans. Jami Social Workers and Occupational Therapists reported over a 50 percent increase in hours spent supporting people, with almost a third increase in the number of people being supported compared to pre-Covid-19 levels. We launched Jami Qwell and Kooth, online counselling and wellbeing support services for adults and students respectively. Significantly, the response from our service users has affirmed that the adapted services are proving to be effective and the uptake by the wider community in the online programmes and support groups has demonstrated the clear need for ongoing remote support.

With current uncertainty regarding the future of the pandemic and the likelihood that some form of social distancing will remain in place for some time to come, we will continue to review and adapt our services. Once the physical crisis is over, we'll all be dealing with the mental health fallout. For Jami, this means supporting

the increased needs of our existing service users as well as creating sustainable services to meet the demand of new referrals.

We are extremely grateful to the community on whom we rely to fund our essential, life-saving work – providing critical mental health services to our community has never been more important. To find out how you can help, go to www.jamiuk.org

If you have concerns about yourself or a loved one, contact Jami on 020 8458 2223 or visit jamiuk.org.

Online counselling and emotional wellbeing

support:

- For adults: qwell.io/jami
- For students: student.kooth.com/jami

If you need immediate help:

- Ring your GP or out of hours service for an emergency appointment
- Call Samaritans on Freephone 116 123 (24 hours a day) or the Jewish Helpline on 0800 652 9249 (Sunday – Thursday 12:00 – 00:00; Friday 12:00 – 15:00)
- Call 999 or NHS Direct on 111

Book Review "Kaddish.com"

Nathan Englander

We first meet Brooklyn-born, secular, 30-something Larry in Memphis Tennessee at the funeral of his father after which he is confronted by his Orthodox sister imploring him to confirm he will say Kaddish for the next 11 months.

He promises to do so but both know he will renege on the undertaking and eventually a compromise is agreed. He will pay a Yeshiva student in Israel to say the daily prayers for him by proxy. He is directed to a website called "Kaddish.com" and signs a kinyan on-line to seal the deal.

Larry slowly evolves in Chareidi "Shaul" and later "Reb Shuli" as his journey back to Orthodoxy, torah learning and married life with children, unfolds. But he becomes increasingly troubled at the realisation that he failed to honour his father's memory in

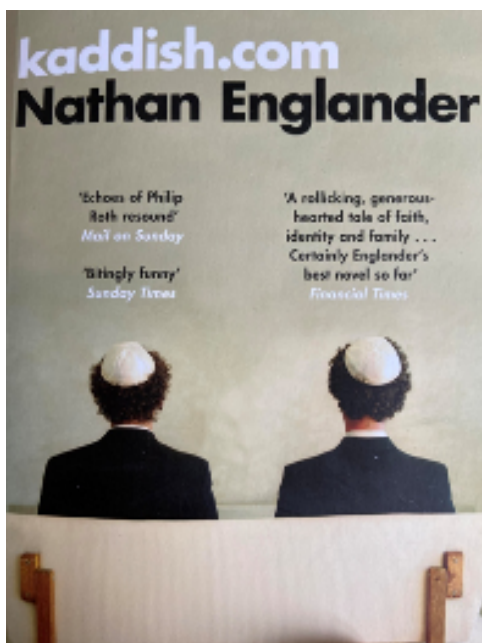
the time-honoured fashion by outsourcing the saying of Kaddish to third party who he knows merely as "Chemi".

He resolves to right that wrong by meeting Chemi the student who prayed in his stead and retake the "birthright" he abandoned many years beforehand. But first he must track down the elusive "Kaddish.com" and the mysterious Chemi. A voyage of discovery in Israel ensues and some disturbing truths are revealed as the plot unfolds.

The story is told with intimacy, humour, candour, some authenticity and Englander is unapologetic in a satirical style that many have compared to Philip Roth.

The casual non Jewish reader may miss the subtle nuances of the Orthodox lifestyle and use of Yiddish phrases but the overall sense and direction of travel will be readily comprehended. We follow his personal journey back to religious commitment and witness how a fractured life can be restored.

The story and characters are engaging, skilfully portrayed and this slim volume of 200 pages can be consumed in one or two sittings.



Message from the Chairs



Welcome to the Magen Avot Tefilla Companion.

Teshuva, Tefilla and Tzedaka are the 3 'T's that we focus on at this time of the year.

Tefilla is the way in which we draw closer to Hashem. We know that there is a positive command to pray daily, as it says in שמות "Worship G-d with all his heart and all his soul." Worshipping with the heart, is Tefilla.

These last few months have been testing times for everyone, and that has included having to daven on our own during lockdown. For those of us who have been able to return to Shul since we reopened, many of us have found that having to wear facemasks, and not being able to sing has

been challenging and sad.

In this Tefilla Companion we have included valuable and meaningful thoughts, insights and contributions which, as we approach the Yamim Noraim, will strengthen and support us in our tefilla.

Davening in a marquee will allow us to participate in the traditional and fulfilling way that we all love, singing from our hearts and free of face masks!

Enjoy this companion!

Simon Bentley & Joy Kay

Chairman & Vice-Chairman

Inspiration from an unlikely source



Rabbi Kenigsberg

Rabbi Joel Kenigsberg grew up in Johannesburg before making Aliyah. He studied in Yeshivot for thirteen years, during which time he received his semicha from the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. At Yeshivat HaKotel, Rabbi Kenigsberg took part in the Hesder program of joint Yeshiva study and IDF service, and was also a shoel u'meshiv for the International students program. He then studied at Eretz Hemdah where he graduated from Manhigut Toranit – a five-year post-Semicha program developing Rabbinic leadership for communities around the world. He holds a B.Ed from Lifshitz College of Education and a Master's degree in Science and Halacha from Bar-Ilan University. He and Sarah are Shlichim of Mizrachi UK.

What greater ordeal could there be for a father than to have to sacrifice his own son?

In the Torah reading of Rosh Hashana, we learn of how this was the *nisayon* (ordeal) faced by our forefather Avraham – not once, but twice.

On the second day of Rosh Hashana we read

about the *Akeidah* – the superhuman feat whereby Avraham bound his son Yitzchak, willing to offer him as a sacrifice as Hashem had commanded. But on the first day we read of Avraham's earlier ordeal – where he was commanded to expel his older son Yishmael from his home and to leave him for thirst in the desert. In both cases, Avraham Avinu, the paragon of *chesed*, was required to subdue his natural instincts in the service of the Creator.

But unlike the *Akeidah*, an inexplicable Divine command, the expulsion of Yishmael had a logical reason behind it as well.

וַתֵּרֶא שָׂרָה אֶת בֶּן הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק:

“Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing.”¹

Rashi quotes the Midrash that explains this verse as alluding to Yishmael's immoral ways. Our Sages derive from the word *מצחק* an indication that Yishmael was involved in the three cardinal sins – murder, idolatry and sexual immorality. As time would go on, so would the danger that Yishmael's destructive behaviour would influence

¹ Bereishit 21:9 (Translation courtesy of Sefaria.org.)

Yitzchak and his future progeny. There was just no way that the home which was to become the foundation of the Jewish people could sustain an individual such as Yishmael. And so, painful as it was, Avraham was forced to banish his own son.

Why is this the story we read on Rosh Hashana? Yishmael, the son who turned his merciful father into a portrait of cruelty, hardly seems like the role model we would want to emulate. What inspiration, if any at all, can we draw from his actions?

The answer can be found further on in three seemingly superfluous words. After Yishmael was banished to the desert and sat dying from thirst, the Torah describes his prayer. We are told how Hashem listened to his cry and heard his voice "באשר הוא שם" – "where he is".²

Rashi, again quoting Chazal, tells us that these words are no mere geographical description, but that they reveal something much deeper.

The gemara in masechet Rosh Hashana teaches:

א"ר יצחק אין דנין את האדם אלא לפי מעשיו של אותה שעה שנאמר (בראשית כא, יז) כי שמע אלקים אל קול הנער באשר הוא שם.

And Rabbi Yitzchak said: **A man is judged only according to his deeds at the time of his judgment**, and not according to his future deeds, as it is stated with regard to Ishmael: **"For God has heard the voice of the lad where he is"** (Genesis 21:17).³

The gemara reveals, based on this verse, that Hashem judges us not based on who we were or who we will be, but solely based on who we are in the moment of judgement. Yishmael had been decidedly corrupt – but that was in the past. His descendants would put Bnei Yisrael through terrible ordeals – but that would be in the future. At the present moment as he sat in the desert pleading for a new lease on life, he had done Teshuva. At that moment he was righteous, and that was all that mattered.

The power of a single moment of genuine Teshuva is captured elsewhere in striking detail. The gemara in masechet Kiddushin⁴ examines a case in which a man gives a woman a ring and states that she should be betrothed to him "on condition that he is a *tzadik* (a completely righteous person)". The gemara concludes that even if he was completely

wicked, the betrothal would still take effect, because perhaps he had had a fleeting moment of genuine teshuva. As the Talmud states elsewhere יש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת – one can acquire his share in the world to come in a single instant. It is this power of Teshuva, of utilising a single moment, באשר הוא שם that we can learn from Yishmael. Despite his dishonourable past, he is a source of inspiration after all.

But perhaps those words carry with them an even more potent message for us in this generation, probably expressed best in the following story which was told to me by a professional photographer. He spoke of how once he had been taking family photos at a wedding and the father of the *chatan* remained with his cellphone in hand throughout. As the father was answering calls and sending messages it eventually became too much for the son, who turned to his father in an outburst and exclaimed "please just not today!" The photographer described how it felt as if years of frustration bubbling under the surface had suddenly come to the fore. What could be seen was a relationship that had lacked the basic element of שם באשר הוא שם – just being there in the moment.

The distraction of mobile devices has become a ubiquitous feature of modern life. How often do we find ourselves meant to be in one place but really focused on somewhere or something else entirely? How often do the people around us lack the attention they deserve because we're responding to a call or a notification? How often do we instantly interrupt a live conversation in favour of a virtual one? Whether it's in shul, in tefilla, with our friends and family, or with ourselves – how often are we just not there?

באשר הוא שם – those three words have a message to teach us that we need now more than ever.

Rather than constantly allowing ourselves to be drifted away, let us remember to stay where we are - to stay in the moment, and to make the most of every moment.

As we stand before Hashem in judgement, the message to be learned from the day's Torah portion is clear. Rosh Hashana is not a day to dwell on the past, nor is it a day to cast our minds off somewhere else. As the year begins, it is a time to focus on the here and now - to decide who it is we really want to be – where we are – באשר הוא שם.

Ketiva veChatima Tova for a good and sweet new year!

² Bereishit 21:17

³ Talmud Bavli, masechet Rosh Hashana 16b

⁴ 49b

Children's Corner



Ruth Ehreich

Ruth Ehreich sources stories like these for Magen Avot's Magen Maxis. They all contain positive messages to which children and adults can connect.

Every year Rabbi Dovid leaves his home in Yerushalayim and travels to America where he teaches adults about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But this year just doesn't feel right. He's standing at the airport ready to fly back to Israel. It means two aeroplanes, the first one to Turkey and then a short flight back to Israel. He's done that lots of times so why does he feel so strange. There's plenty of time before Rosh Hashana.

So now he stands at Kennedy Airport and hears the loudspeaker announce: "Flight 646 is boarding in ten minutes. All passengers on connecting flight to Tel Aviv should get off after landing and go to Gate 26". So he goes to the gate, hands in his boarding pass, climbs onto the aeroplane and sits back in relief. After a short while he hears another announcement: "This is your pilot speaking. Prepare for landing in 25 minutes".

So the plane lands, he goes to boarding gate 26 and is soon on the flight to Tel Aviv. He sits back and relaxes until..... another announcement: "This is your captain speaking: in 10 minutes we land in..... Damascus!"

Damascus! Catastrophe! Is this a Purim joke? Damascus is in Syria! He's in an Arab country with an Israeli passport, long peyos, long black coat – He's terrified. And Rosh Hashana starts tomorrow night! He calls over the steward and explains his predicament. The steward tells

him not to worry. "Don't worry, we'll look after you. You've made a simple mistake. Instead of boarding at Gate 26 you boarded at Gate 27. But stay on the plane. It's going to India and we'll look after you." But it's our New Year tomorrow night! I need to be in Israel!

"Ok, Sir!" And the steward takes his phone and has a short conversation with the pilot. "Stay on the plane and after landing in India we'll take you to New Delhi in China. There's an American Army Base there which has a number of Jewish servicemen as well as a Jewish Army Rabbi. Stay there for your New Year and afterwards we'll get you onto a flight to Israel."

This is crazy! America, Turkey, Damascus, India, China! And he won't be able to lead the davening in his shul in Jerusalem, he has no shofar, no food, no apple and honey.

Anyway, finally, at long last, they land in China. And as promised, there is an army jeep waiting for Rabbi Dovid and the driver drops him off at the army base. He is so exhausted that he drops straight off to sleep. He has a dream. His grandfather is learning aloud and he says: "Dovid, Hashem is still looking after you, and he must have a reason for landing you in China".

It's now 20 minutes before Rosh Hashanah starts. No Jewish serviceman to be seen. Rabbi Dovid is frantic! He searches in desperation and finally gets into the main office. "Where are the Jewish servicemen? Where's the Chaplain?" "Oh they got permission to get an extra home leave so they can spend the New Year with their families!" And so Rosh

Hashana begins. Rabbi Dovid davens by heart, but it's the best he can do.

It's late – Rosh Hashana is nearly over. Suddenly Rabbi Dovid hears a sound outside his room and opens the door. There's a man standing there wearing shorts, a vest top and scruffy trainers. "I am called Georgie and I'm the son of the Army Chaplain. My father is the Army Chaplain responsible for all the Jewish Servicemen in Asia. I'm usually in University, but I came here for a holiday. Here..."and he hands the Rabbi a small bag. Inside is a Siddur, a small bottle of Kosher wine and a Shofar!

Rabbi Dovid looks at his watch. It's just a few minutes before sunset. "Listen" he says. "We've only got a few minutes left. It's important that you hear the sounds I'm going to blow. No interruptions. Just listen really carefully"

Georgie listens to the beautiful sound of the Shofar. He concentrates deeply. He wants to hug this Rabbi! The sound has touched him! He feels as if he's drowning in the sound!

When Rabbi Dovid has finished he says. "I don't understand. I know nothing about

being Jewish. Please tell me more!"The Rabbi tells Georgie: "You have a Jewish neshama – a Jewish soul. It recognises the sound of the Shofar!" The two men stay up all night as the Rabbi teaches Georgie about Rosh Hashanah. The following morning the army jeep arrives to take Rabbi Dovid to the airport to catch his flight to Tel Aviv. Georgie is so excited by what he has learned that he doesn't want the Rabbi to leave!

Finally, Rabbi Dovid is on the flight to Tel Aviv. He leans back in his seat and falls asleep. In his dream he sees his Grandfather. "You see Dovid? It all started when you got onto the wrong flight! Hashem always has a plan and maybe all this happened so you could meet Georgie, he could hear the sound of the Shofar and has decided to learn more! It's all been worth it to save a Jewish soul from getting lost!

Well, Georgie continued learning about Judaism, he learns more Torah. He becomes a Ba'al Teshuva. He goes to Yeshiva and becomes a famous Rabbi in America.

Teshuva: A Lawyer's Perspective



Paul Taylor

Paul Taylor QC specialises in criminal appeals, often involving homicide and mentally disordered offenders. He has represented prisoners on death row in the Caribbean. Paul was appointed a Recorder of the Family Court in 2019.

As a lawyer I can understand the concept of teshuva from a legal perspective. I sin, so I am liable for punishment. I repent. The slate is cleaned, and so punishment is averted. But from a Torah perspective it must be more than simply feeling guilt and shame and attempting to achieve a return to where I was this time last year – minus the aveiros of the last 12 months. Whilst this is clearly a desirable aim, without more it may not inspire us to carry out the often uncomfortable audit of our life. So, the process must be more than a purely legal construct.

The essential elements of teshuva appear to involve a yearning to change. A desire to elevate myself spiritually and to re-connect with Hashem. In short, it is an opportunity and a springboard to grow. Repairing the damage of the past year is just a preliminary step on this journey. All of this requires intense introspection. Rabbi Lord Sacks describes Yom Kippur as the most intensely personal of all the festivals. It “is about what it means to be me, this unique person that I am. It makes us ask: What have I done with my life? Whom have I hurt or harmed? How have I behaved? What have I done with G-d’s greatest gift, life itself? What have I lived for and what will I be remembered for?”¹

Crucially, the part of the power of teshuva that we may sometimes overlook is that the potential for this growth is possible not just *in spite* of our aveiros, but *as a direct result* of having stumbled in life. As Rabbi Sacks puts it: “There is no failure I experience that does not make me a deeper human being; no challenge I accept, however much I fall short, that does not develop in me strengths I would not otherwise have had.”

In my professional life I have seen this process in action. This is a fairly extreme example. Some years ago, I was instructed to advise a convicted murderer about a potential appeal. He was illiterate, had a long history of alcohol abuse and had spent most of his adult life unemployed, homeless or in prison. He had finally committed this horrendous offence in an alcoholic stupor and was serving life imprisonment. But there was now evidence that suggested that his alcohol had caused brain damage that reduced his responsibility for his offence, and an appeal was possible. Yet, when we met, he told me that having thought about matters he no longer wished to deny responsibility for his actions. He accepted his punishment and deeply regretted his offence. Moreover, he had used his time usefully in prison to learn to read and write (composing poems in the style of Seamus Heaney), to address his alcoholism, and to help other more vulnerable prisoners. In short, he had changed his perspective on who he was and more importantly who he could be.

Rabbi Sacks explains the desired approach to teshuva as follows: “when we change the way we think we change the way we feel. And when we feel differently, we live differently. What we believe shapes the way we become...We are not destined to be forever what we were...”² It is this ability to build on our mistakes that allows us to grow.

Rav Soloveitchik encapsulated the essential elements of the teshuva process: “Indeed true *teshuvah* (repentance) not only achieves *kapparah* (acquittal and erasure of penalty), it should also bring about *taharah* (purification) from *tum’ah* (spiritual pollution), liberating man from his hard-hearted ignorance and insensitivity. Such *teshuvah* restores man’s spiritual viability and rehabilitates him to his original state. *And sometimes it makes man rise to heights he never dreamed he could reach.*”³

² *Ibid.*

³ On Repentance, (Pinchas H. Peli), p.52 (emphasis added).

¹ Ceremony & Covenant, pp.31-32

Prophetic Thoughts on Teshuva in our Prayers



Elkan Adler

Elkan is the father of the glorious Yonah, Eliana and Vivi and the husband of the wonderful Patti. He is also currently a gabbai of Magen Avot.

As lockdown began, I heard a shiur given by the Emeritus Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Sacks who was suggesting that davening at home can be used as an opportunity to spend time focussing on the Tehilim/Psalms we say in our tefillos/prayers which we often otherwise don't take the time to really consider. Combined with the stage I have reached in my own personal Nach study, I would like to share some thoughts on two Mizmorim of Tehilim which have spoken to me in particular at this time and their usage in our Tefillos.

The first is not a Mizmor/psalm which we are familiar with as a whole during our daily or even annual cycle of tefillos and that is Mizmor 51. What initially struck me is that this Mizmor is set up as a response to the "sin" of King David with Bassheva. I appreciate of course that Chazal speak negatively of anyone who would claim that King David actually sinned with Bassheva but both Nosson HaNovi in Shmuel 2, Chap 12 and this Mizmor seem to indicate that there was indeed some kind of sin – which on a basic level would, I think, be linked to adultery and unlawful killing. Now is not the place to go further into the question of that situation but I think we are safe in saying that the reference to Bassheva in this context is meant to make us think of these two very serious sins (whether attributable to King David or not) – and King David is not trying to hide from them, rather he is actively confessing and crying out to Hashem for forgiveness. Indeed, in the introductory verses he lists all three types of sin classes – peshah, ovon and chayt. King David seems ready to give up on his personal pride and use this very personal and difficult time as a lesson to others. It is a wonderful Mizmor (is there one which isn't?) and certainly worthy of a read in full.

One might have thought that Chazal would steer

clear of this Mizmor when creating or siddur/machzor considering its provenance. However, one of the key pesukim of our period of Teshuva – such a visceral plea which we say throughout the selichos and repeat many times on Yom Kippur is taken from here (verse 13) – “Don't send me out from before You and don't take from me Your Divine Presence” אֶל-תְּשַׁלְּכֵנִי מִלְּפָנֶיךָ וְרוּחַ קִדְשְׁךָ אַל-תִּקַּח מִמֶּנִּי.

Not only that but also the possuk which we use throughout the year – including in this holiest of periods – is sourced from here. We say it before every Amidah “Adonai, open my lips so that my mouth may declare Your praise” (v 17 Koren translation) אֲדַנְי שְׁפֹתַי תִּפְתָּח וּפִי יַגִּיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ.

But why would Chazal want to point to one of our greatest hero's gravest sins? In a way though that may in fact be their point. The Mizmor starts from a deeply sin ridden place but through King David's sincere efforts in Teshuva and soul searching he atones for where he went wrong, learns from mistakes and sets himself up for a life which is closer to Hashem. We are being reminded that even our religious heroes sinned and sometimes sinned in terrible ways, but the path of Return and the means to change their lives (and we learn therefore, our lives), is open and available to us all, always.

The second Mizmor is one we say every day and is also one which Chazal saw fit that we continue saying even on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur – this is Mizmor 30. It is a wonderful Mizmor (is there one which isn't?). There are a number of ways the commentators understand it but for these purposes I would like to follow the classic commentary on Nach by the Radak who sees this as also relating to the same sin concerning Bassheva and Uriah the Chiti discussed above. This Mizmor starts with the introduction “A Mizmor and Song at the dedication of the house – of David.” מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר-הַנְּחִמָּה הַבְּיַת לְדָוִד. Now we know that King David himself did not build the

“House”, the Beis Hamikdosh. That was left to his son Shlomo. However, for a while it was not clear whether King David’s monarchy would survive and in particular whether Shlomo would succeed him and build the Beis Hamikdosh. According to the Radak, this is a song of thanksgiving by King David when he was assured that his son Shlomo would in fact be the King to build this “dwelling place” of Hashem on earth - in some ways the pinnacle of our relationship with Him. Particularly as Shlomo was the son of Bassheva, in this Mizmor King David sees this assurance as the ultimate sign that his prayers for forgiveness and recognition of his change of ways discussed above, has been accepted in the most wonderful way. The enemies he mentions in this Mizmor are those who would have sought to take the kingship away from Shlomo and so he, King David, is now in a position to say “You have turned my sorrow into dancing. You have removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy...” (Koren translation), הַפְּכֵת מִסִּפְדֵי לְמַחֹל לִי פִתְחֵת שְׂקֵי וְתֹאזְרֵנִי שְׂמֵחָה. I think those words in particular are deeply moving and even more so considering the context and so, so positive. What a way to begin our day, every day. No wonder Chazal chose to include them in Shacharis/psukei de zimoroh regardless of the occasion - be it Yom Kippur, Tisha b’Av, Yom Haatzmut or a mundane Tuesday. Not only that but in realising the heights that Hashem allowed him to reach and in particular bearing in mind the sin(s) from which he rose, King David finishes this Mizmor, continuing from the above “...so that I may sing to You and not be silent. Hashem my God, forever will I thank You” לְמַעַן יִזְמְרֶךָ כְּבוֹד ה' וְלֹא יִדַּם ה' אֱלֹהֵי לְעוֹלָם אָוֶןךָ and indeed forever since then we have been using King David’s words to sing to Hashem, thank Him and strive to improve ourselves and the world around us.

How do we achieve what King David achieved? Flipping back to the end of Mizmor 51 gives us one hint. There King David speaks of what he believes the way of Teshuva should really be. Pesukim 18-19 “You do not desire a zevach sacrifice or else I would give it; you do not delight in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of Hashem are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God You will not despise.” כִּי לֹא־תִחַפֵּץ זֶבַח וְאֶתְנֶה עֹלָה לֹא תִרְצֶה. וְזָבַחַי אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ נְשַׁבְּרָה לִב־נִשְׁבָּר וְנִדְבָה אֱלֹהִים לֹא תִבְזֶה. To be a little more tachles for our current situation where we still do not unfortunately have a Beis Hamikdosh and korbonos (sacrifices), I think we

need to read “prayers” for “sacrifices”. The Mizmor is not saying God forbid that the korbonos of the Beis Hamikdosh or prayers are not essential (see the last 2 pesukim of the Mizmor) but it does say something about their purpose. They are a means to achieve a better life but are not an end themselves. In this context, what Hashem really ultimately wants is for us is to be humble enough to recognise where/when we have done wrong and utilise the power we all have, to change for the better.

I think it’s important to think about what prayer or sacrifices can/should do. On the face of it, if Hashem is all knowing, infinite and good and just, He surely is giving us what is “right” and therefore why would our prayers or korbonos change anything? Like a child saying “please, please, please” why do we think if we nag enough, we can change Hashem’s mind? I heard it said in the name of Rabbi Soloveitchik that what Prayer should be doing is giving us an opportunity to change ourselves, to reflect on what we have done and what we want to do, where we are and where we are going, on who we are and who we want to be. Through this process we are enabled to change who we are and therefore in this change or even desire to change, Hashem will interact with us in a different way and treat us differently. This is the power of Prayer and Korbonos and Teshuva which I think these Mizmorim are referring to.

I think that this is also the point that Chazal were looking to drive home in the Haftorah selected for Yom Kippur morning. As we are in the middle of fasting and prayer we read this, in some ways incredibly radical portion from Yesha’yahu/Isaiah in Chapter 58. If you will forgive me, I won’t try and paraphrase but set out the entirety of the portion I am referring to as I think it is so powerful.

“Cry out with a full voice [Hashem says to the Prophet], don’t hold back, lift up your voice like a shofar and tell my people of their transgression and the house of Yaakov their sin. They look for Me daily and want to know My ways. As if they are a nation which does Tzedaka and did not forsake the law of its God. They superficially ask me for the righteous justice and are eager to get close to God. “Why did we fast and You did not see, You do not recognise that we afflicted ourselves?”

Because on your fast days you do business and you look to claim payments from your debtors.

וְנִחַד ה' תְּמִיד וְהִשְׁבִּיעַ בְּצַחְצְחוֹת נִפְשָׁךְ וְעִצְמוֹתֶיךָ יִחַלֵּץ וְהִיִּיתָ כְּגֹן רֶוַח וּכְמוֹצָא מִיַּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִכְזָבוּ מִיָּמָיו:

The point being made is, don't think you can just go through the actions such as fasting and saying or even heartily singing prayers and expect magically that is enough. Don't confuse the rite for the content and in particular don't think that Hashem will hear you for so long as you are participating in injustice and not helping the weakest elements of society – the poor, the hungry, the naked etc. A similar message to the one we read (again wonderfully radically in message and in Chazal's timing I think) on Shabbes Chazon – the Shabbes before Tisha b'Av where we mourn the Temple and all our suffering. There in Chapter 1, Yesha'yahu brings to our attention again the core of how we can make the world a better place and reminds us of what really counts. (For further on this I would also strongly, strongly recommend looking at the conclusion to the haftorah we say on Tish b'Av morning from Yirmeyah/Jeremiah).¹ The root creation story of our people is that we were made to suffer through centuries of being slaves in Egypt and Hashem saved us – the slaves, the weakest and most vulnerable of society and destroyed the strong oppressors. These Neveim / Prophets are stressing one of the most repeated messages of Tenach, that we must learn from these experiences and never ignore the cry of the weak and needy – whoever they may be. If we do not hear their cry, why would Hashem hear ours?

In Tehilim there is often a discernible historical context, as in so much of Tenach obviously. Particularly in Tehilim however, what is there for our taking, are the universal and infinite messages that can apply in our own worlds to make our own lives and that of our families, communities, the Jewish people and the world better and closer to the Divine.

Please G-d that is something we can further this year so that we take King David's lead and not remain silent but join in and write further lines to the eternal song to Hashem in thanksgiving and also partner with Hashem to change ourselves for the better and make the world a better place – one based on Chesed (Kindness), Tzedokoh (Righteousness) and Mishpot (Justice)².

1 Chap 9, pesukim 22 & 23

2 Ibid.

Behold you fast whilst/for fighting and arguing and strike with a wicked fist. You don't fast today in a way that your voice will be heard on high. Is this the fast I choose, a day on which a person afflicts themselves? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast and a day which is desired by Hashem?

Rather, this is the fast I choose – one where the bindings of wickedness are opened, the oppressed are let free and every yoke is broken. It is sharing your bread with the hungry and taking the wandering poor into your home and when you see a naked person you clothe them and do not ignore your kin. Then your light will break like the morning and your wellbeing will quickly spring up and your righteousness will go before you and the glory of Hashem will be your rear-guard. Then you will call and Hashem will answer, you will call out and Hashem will say “Here I am” – if you remove from amongst you the yoke, angry finger pointing and evil speech. And if you are compassionate to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted person – then your light will shine in the darkness and your dark times will become like noon. And Hashem will guide you constantly and will satisfy your soul in drought and give strength to your bones and you will be like a watered garden and like a water spring whose waters do not fail.”

קרא בגרון אל־תחשף כשופר הַרם קולך והגד לעמי פְּשָׁעַם וְלִבֵּית יַעֲקֹב חֲטָאתָם:

ואותי יום יום ידרשון ודעת דרכי יחפצון כגוי אשר־צדקה עָשָׂה וּמִשְׁפָּט אֲ-יֹ לֹא עָזַב יִשְׁאֲלוּנִי מִשְׁפָּטֵי־צֶדֶק קִרְבַּת אֲ-יִם יִחְפְּצוּנִי:

למה צמנו ולא ראית ענינו נפשנו ולא תדע הן ביום צמכם תמצאו־חפץ וְכָל־עֲצֻבֵיכֶם תִּנְגָּשׁוּ:

הן לריב ומצה תצומו ולהפות באגרוף רשע לא־תצומו כיום להשמיע במרום קולכם:

הקזה יהיה צום אבחרהו יום ענות אדם נפשו הלכה כאגמן ראשו ושק ואפר יציע הקזה תקרא־צום ויום רצון לה:

הלוא זה צום אבחרהו פתח תרצבות רשע התר אגדות מוטה ושלח רצועים חפשים וְכָל־מוֹטָה תִּנְתַּקוּ:

הלוא פרס לרעב לחמד ועניים מרודים תביא בית כִּי־תִרְאֶה עָרִם וְכִסִּיתוּ וּמִבְּשָׂרָךְ לֹא תִתַּעַלֵּם:

אז יבקע כשחר אורה וארכתה מהרה תצמח והלך לפניה צדקה כבוד ה' יאסף:

אז תקרא וה' יענה תשוע ויאמר הנני אם־תסיר מתוך מוטה ושלח אצבע ודבר־אָוֶן:

ותפק לרעב נפשך ונפש נענה תשביע וזרח בחשך אורה ואפל־תך:

The Akeidah – Kriat Hatorah for Second Day Rosh Hashanah



Dan Artman

Dan writes: I am a Mathematics Teacher at Hasmonian High School, specialising in A Level Maths. When I'm not teaching maths, I am probably leining! I lein regularly at Magen Avot and try to lein every single Shabbat. I made a siyum 8 years ago, at the shul I was brought up in (Belmont United Synagogue) when I had leined every single parsha for the first time. I have leined the Shabbat parsha at three different minyanim on one single Shabbat and am still looking to see if I can make it four at some point in the future!

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

Now, after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him: 'Abraham'; and he said: 'Here I am.'

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךְךָ אֶת-יִצְחָק וְאֶת-אִשְׁרָתְךָ וְלֵךְ אֶל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר
אֵלֶיךָ:

And He said: 'Take now your son, your only son, who you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering on one of the mountains which I will tell you.'

These verses introduce the most difficult episode of Avraham's life: his tenth and final test, the Akeidah, in which Hashem asked him to bring his son Yitschak as an offering. The mefarshim (commentators) discuss the implication of the word נסה (tested), found in this passuk (verse) and offer various interpretations.

R' Saadiah Gaon, quoted by the Ibn Ezra, understands the word as indicating that Hashem used this test to show the people Avraham's righteousness. But Ibn Ezra himself objects to this interpretation, as the Akeidah occurred in front of no other witnesses other than Avraham

and Yitschak! So according to the Ibn Ezra, given the lack of other witnesses, how could it be that this would show the people Avraham's righteousness if nobody else was present at the time!

Radak adds another question that addresses נסיונות (tests) in general. Hashem knows the future, and He knew that Avraham would pass this very difficult test. So what, then, was the purpose of the test? Radak explains that indeed, the test was intended to show everyone Avraham's righteousness. However, this was not intended for the people of Avraham's generation as we already explained they were not present at the Akeidah when it took place. They may not have even been aware it happened. Rather, it was intended to show later generations, believers in the truth of the Torah's narrative, the extent of Avraham's love of Hashem, and to teach that one must love Hashem with all one's heart and soul, as Avraham did.

Radak also notes that the story of Akeidat Yitschak was originally passed down from Yitschak to his son Yaakov, and onward to their descendants. After the Torah was given, the story became public knowledge, and some believed it to be authentic, whilst others denied its truth. Today, he says (Radak lived in the 12th and 13th centuries), most people believe that Moshe Rabbeinu's Torah is authentic, and that its narratives are true. The story of Akeidat Yitschak is a testament to the complete love Avraham had for Hashem, and it highly appropriate that people learn his behaviour of how to properly serve Hashem.

According to Radak's explanation of Avraham's נסיון (test), the purpose of the test was not for Avraham's benefit (as Hashem already knew that he would withstand the challenge) but for the

benefit of humanity in subsequent generations.

Ramban, offers a different perspective on the purpose of נסיונות. Both generally and in this specific instance. בכירה (free will) gives one the choice to perform or refrain from any particular action. At the same time, Hashem, who is omniscient, knows which way the person will direct their actions. Thus, a test is only so from its subject's view; Hashem, as the One who administers the test, already knows that the result will be. From Hashem's perspective, the person (in this case: Avraham) is not being tested as much as being given an opportunity to express his dedication to Hashem in practice. Hashem knew that Avraham would withstand the test, but he could be rewarded for it only after succeeding in overcoming the challenge and performing the command of Hashem. Before Akeidat Yitschak, Avraham would receive reward for having the love for Hashem in his heart; afterwards, he would also be rewarded for the devotion demonstrated by his actions.

In Tehillim 11:5, the verse states: ה' צדיק יבחן (Hashem tests the righteous one). When Hashem knows that a righteous person will withstand it, He will test him so to make the tsaddik even more righteous. Thus, concludes the Ramban, all tests recorded in the Torah were administered for the benefit of the person being tested.

When one reads this Torah portion, one cannot help but feel it is extremely difficult to attain the lofty madreigah (spiritual level) that Avraham was on to willingly agree to offer up his son on Hashem's request. However, a reason that we do read about it on Rosh Hashanah, is to show us that one can aspire to the greatness of Avraham

in his sheer devotion to Hashem. Avraham was a human being just like all of us and we all have the potential to reach Avraham's heights.

Numerous references are made in our tefillot to the Akeidah and the devotion of both Avraham and Yitschak. For example, we plead that for their sake, their children will be remembered for a good life and salvation on this Day of Judgement. In addition, one reason for the custom of Tashlich (the visit to a body of water where verses describing Hashem's attributes of compassion and forgiveness are recited) is to recall one part of the Akeidah story, as described in the Midrash. According to the Midrash, the Satan, in an attempt to stop Avraham from executing Hashem's will, took the form of an impassable river before Avraham and Yitschak. Instead of turning around, they pressed forward, into the river, until the water reached their necks. At that point they turned to Hashem and davened and said "Save me, Hashem, for the waters have reached until the soul" whereupon the water immediately disappeared. Our visit to the water on Tashlich is to recall their courage and determination in fulfilling Hashem's will and to ask Hashem in their merit to forgive our sins.

So the leining on the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah, is much more meaningful on this day than its reference to the ram that Avraham offers up at the end of the Torah portion (A ram's horn is used for a Shofar blown on Rosh Hashanah). When reading this we should aspire to the greatness of Avraham and Yitschak and aim to be as devoted as they were to follow Hashem's ways and perform his mitzvot! What better a day to think about this than on Rosh Hashanah!

Unesaneh Tokef



Daniel Greenberg

Daniel Greenberg is a lawyer specialising in legislation and the legislative process. He has 30 years experience in the private and public sectors dealing with legislation. He was a Parliamentary Counsel for 20 years; he is now an officer in the House of Commons, and a writer, trainer and adviser.

If a person is told by the doctors in Ellul that he or she has three months to live, what should they pray for on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?

As they stand in shul surrounded by the congregation singing the constant refrain of "remember us for life, King who loves life, for your sake the God of life" do they sing along with everybody else, or do they stand there in stunned silence with the feeling of someone who has already been condemned to a year in which their prayers for life are doomed to be rejected?

One answer might, perhaps, be that one should never give up hope of life, and that the doctors don't always know best. Perhaps they should be saying to themselves that if they only pray hard enough God may reverse the decree and grant them another year of life?

The problem with that is twofold. First it ignores reality in a way that any helpful kind of religion does not. As Father Brown says in GK Chesterton's *The Blue Cross*, attacking reason is bad theology. It is true that God is all powerful and if God decrees that the ravages of a final stage terminal cancer are simply to disappear from a person's body then that is what they will do. But that is a miracle, a departure from the rules of the automated miracle that we call nature, and in rabbinic tradition we do not rely on miracles, nor is it generally helpful to make them the focus of our prayers. Religion should

be about confronting reality, not attempting to escape it.

The second problem with saying "remember us for life" as a prayer for the doctors to be wrong is that it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of praying for life on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The true intention behind this prayer is perhaps best understood by reference to the electrically dramatic liturgical centrepiece of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Unesaneh tokef prayer. In this passage we imagine the angels in heaven trembling with fear as they see us approaching the moment of annual judgement like a large flock of sheep being counted and inspected by the shepherd. They tremble because they know not one of us deserves to survive divine judgement, and we tremble as, crowded together like a flock of sheep, we approach that moment of judgement when the flock is forced through a small gap in the fence and for one brief moment the shepherd's piercing eye glances at and evaluate each individual sheep as it clambers through the gap. There is no more escaping in the comfort of the herd, as for that one moment God and I confront each other with an individual intensity unsurpassed by any other moment of the year.

The rest of the year we take shelter in the herd immunity of our religious community and ask to be allowed to share in the merits of the community, pooling our strengths and weaknesses and supporting each other in spiritual life as we do in material matters; but for that one split second we feel the eye of God on us with an unshakeable determination to scan the innermost realities of our mind, to record our achievements and failures, to evaluate our hopes and objectives, and to record a divine appraisal of each of us as a unique individual with a place in the flock that cannot be

substituted by any other, and whose potential for success and failure cannot be moderated by reference to any other member's contribution.

And as we crawl through the gap and, full of relief at our immediate survival, go scampering off to join the rest of the flock on the safe side of the fence, we say together a phrase that is sometimes mistranslated as "repentance, prayer and charity can avert the evil decree". This is sometimes associated with the idea that God's annual decree begins on Rosh Hashanah but is not finalised until Yom Kippur and therefore there is time to avert it through repentance, prayer and charity. That is wrong on two counts.

First, if it were the intention, we would not repeat it on Yom Kippur itself but say it only on Rosh Hashanah. More importantly, however, it rests on the same common mistranslation of the phrase. Translated properly this phrase does not refer to averting the evil decree, but to averting "the evil of the decree".

There is not one of us who is not going to face challenges this coming year. From the most cataclysmic trauma of being diagnosed with a terminal illness, to the relatively trivial things which we will find more annoying than we know they really deserve when compared to the troubles faced by others, but which are real and disturbing for us none the less. And as we stand on Rosh Hashanah there will be some of these

challenges that are already inevitable, barring the kind of miracles on which we do not rely and for which it is not helpful to pray.

But the only thing that is decreed is what will happen to us, not how we will react to it. Even death is not evil if I approach it in the right way: as the Psalmist puts it, "even as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil if You are by my side". Introspection and consequent repair of our habits (teshuvah), meditation on how to approach the world as a servant of God (tefilla) and determination to seize every opportunity while breath lasts in our bodies to be a useful member of the flock, taking the opportunities of this world to do those tiny kindnesses to others that make the difference between Heaven and Hell (tzedoko) will enable us to confront whatever decrees God has made for each of us this coming year, knowing that so far as we are able to we have identified the negative and turned it into a positive.

I do not wish my fellow members of the Magen Avot flock a year of only good things, because that would be childish. I wish us a year in which we are granted the strength and perception to confront whatever bad things come along, and to find as much potential for good in them as possible.

L'shono tovo u'mesuko – to a year where we relish the good and find sweetness in the bad.

L'kale Orech Din



David-Hillel Ruben

David-Hillel Ruben is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy in the University of London. He received his PhD in Philosophy at Harvard University, and taught at the London School of Economics for many years. He is now attached to Birkbeck College, University of London. He is the author of five books and many professional articles in the philosophy journals. His latest book, "The Metaphysics of Action", was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2018.

There is a stanza in a piyyut that we say in the Chazzan's repetition for the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Shachris amidah, that gives me fresh pause, and startles me anew, every year that I read it. It is in L'kale Orech Din: "To the One Who analyses ideas". Perhaps it strikes me so forcibly because of my own profession. (I deal with ideas like a fishmonger deals with fish!) The Artscroll translation of the verb הוֹגֵה is perhaps something of a stretch, although I like that translation. The note in the Artscroll Machzor claims that it means that G-d analyses (הוֹגֵה) the reasons for man's ideas. That interpretation strikes me as implausible. It makes G-d the Cosmic Psychologist. The Routledge Machzor's translation is even more of a stretch: "Who uttereth knowledge in judgement." There is certainly no uttering mentioned in the stanza.

The verb הוֹגֵה is more literally translated as "conceive" or "contemplate". Taking the stanza in the p'shat, it conveys the idea that it is G-d Himself Who conceives or contemplates or analyses ideas. What is clear is that the paytan is ascribing to the Almighty some type of intellectual virtue.

If so, what is the paytan trying to tell us in this stanza? Imitatio Dei (Imitation of G-d) is a central conception of Jewish belief: we should be holy because He is holy. He teaches us by example. We should strive to be like Him. Of course, it is

beyond human reason to really understand what any of these attributes mean, when applied to G-d. But the Torah by necessity speaks in the language of man; it caters to our own limited ability to understand these mysteries. It expresses a goal of human activity in a way that we can grasp. It asks us to develop our character, our middot, in a way which takes His own character as the paradigm or exemplar.

We are quite used to those aspects of our imitation of Him in cases of action, like justice, mercy, compassion, loving-kindness. Indeed, most of the other p'sukim in this piyyut speak of just these Divine traits: He is fair, kind, merciful, compassionate, forgiving, and so on. So should we be so too. Let's think of these as Divine attributes of behaviour.

But the pasuk I have opened with does not speak of one of these attributes of behaviour, but rather of one of the Divine intellectual attributes. He conceives ideas, so, by Imitatio Dei, we should also conceive ideas, or analyse them, as the translation of the Artscroll Machzor would have it. If He analyses ideas, so should we. If He conceives or contemplates ideas, we should strive to conceive and contemplate ideas. The piyyut speaks of other intellectual attributes of the Almighty in addition to analysing or conceiving: He reveals, He knows, He scrutinises. So if these are among His attributes and we are enjoined to imitate G-d insofar as mere mortals are able, we also must analyse, scrutinise, reveal, and know.

Once we start thinking about how we are commanded to follow, insofar as a mere mortal can, the examples set for us by G-d's ways of thinking as well as His ways of doing, His intellectual attributes as well as His behavioural attributes, we can see so many other examples of this in the liturgy. Just think of the fourth bracha in the Amidah: "You favour man with knowledge, and teach mortals understanding." It is obvious

why we insert the *atah chonantanu* paragraph into the fourth bracha at the close of Shabbos: because the core of analysing and conceiving is the drawing of pertinent distinctions. He draws distinctions between various types of things, and so we should too.

We are used to assuming the application of these intellectual attributes in the context of Torah study. This application comes as no surprise to us. For example, just consider the thirteen rules of logic for the study of Torah text, as given in the *baraitha* of Rabbi Ishmael (בריייתא דרבי ישמל), which we say every morning after reciting *karbonos*. They focus on how thinking proceeds by the use of analogy, comparison, inference, and how to deal with contradiction.

So we are quite used to valuing thought and wisdom and understanding, analysis and drawing distinctions, in the back-and-forth of Talmud Torah. It is part and parcel of Talmudic reasoning. But nowhere, in the *piyyut* I quoted, or in the fourth bracha of the *Amidah*, are these virtues confined to Torah study. They have a more general application. For example, we make a special bracha when one sees a person renown for secular learning: שנתן מחכמתו לבשר ודם. We see then that secular science is also considered as Divine wisdom given by God to humans.

I think that what this shows is that engaging in secular studies is not only permitted, but is actually obligatory, insofar as *Imitatio Dei* is obligatory. We aren't supposed to withdraw into our own, compartmentalised Jewish world, the world of so many Charedi communities. They aren't "more orthodox" or more "Jewish" by so doing; if anything, they are less so. The secular press regularly refers to these communities as "ultra-orthodox". It is an infuriating appellation, because they depart from the classical Jewish stance of engaging in understanding the world about us, following G-d's own example as One who contemplates ideas.

The Maharal of Prague writes that all forms of knowledge are aspects of the highest revelation of the Divine that manifest in this world. The world was created by means of this knowledge and thus all science is rooted in G-d's own thought. Scientists

approach G-d when they come to understand the natural world. The scientific study of Creation, called "*Ma'asey Bereshit*," is itself part of the mitzvah of imitating G-d's intellectual activity. The Rambam explained that "*Ma'asey Bereshit*" refers to the natural sciences, and to research into the origins of Creation. Above all others, it was the RaLBaG (also known as Gersonides), the early fourteenth century Talmudist and philosopher, who developed this idea of the Imitation of G-d's intellectual virtues by man. For Gersonides, intellectual activity and behaviour connect, for he thought it a positive commandment that one who attains these intellectual abilities in turn teach others how to do the same.

The traditional Jewish way is not the way of closing oneself off from secular studies, or of circumscribing what areas are open to study and what are not. The authentic Jewish way enjoins us to understand the world about us, as a part of what imitating G-d's own intellectual attributes teaches us. In order to do this, one hardly needs to be a professional academic. I don't want to be interpreted as saying that everyone must do this as their primary activity in life. The way of life I am describing is one for accountants and doctors, lawyers and business people, taxi drivers and tailors. It is more a matter of having a general intellectual curiosity about, a lively interest in, the world around one, finding the best both in general as well as in Jewish culture. It is about being an inquirer in many worlds simultaneously. It is Shakespeare and the Shulchan Aruch, not the latter rather than the former (and most certainly not the former rather than the latter).

To say this to a central orthodox community like our own is to preach to the converted. But sometimes I think we are defensive about this, thinking that our *derech* is a compromise between the secular and the Jewish world. That is something the Charedim might like us to think. If my argument is sound, our way is not a compromise at all. It IS the authentic Jewish way, and it is those who value only the Shulchan Aruch and not Shakespeare (I use this particular contrast to stand, of course, for a more general contrast) who should be on the defensive.

Jonah and the Universal Experience of Being Swallowed by a Fish



Natan Maurer

Natan Maurer studied in Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh. He is currently studying law at the University of Cambridge.

Introduction

Why do commentaries on Tanakh go to such lengths to describe the exact mechanics of how miracles took place? This question struck me as I read through commentaries on the 2nd chapter of the Book of Jonah, as different sources throughout history have endeavoured to demonstrate the mechanics of how Jonah survived within the fish.

The details demand meaning because pure factual explanation is inappropriately limiting when discussing a miracle. Thus, we begin a brief foray into considering how Jonah survived within a fish. In this article, I will develop a conception of why Jonah was swallowed by a fish, and how the details of his time within it reflect his internal journey throughout the book. I will argue that the fish becomes a manifestation of the universal journey of repentance. Whilst the core idea of this is backed up through the commentaries (in particular Rav Chaim Schmulevitz beautifully describes it in this fashion), my attempts to connect the details back to this idea are at most implied by those who provide them. Nonetheless, the message they convey is at least to me undeniable.

Q1: Is This a Special Kind of “Magic” Fish?

A brief foray into the sources demonstrate that this was no ordinary fish, and the unique word ‘וימן’ (and G-d “provided”), reveals that this was by design. In Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Tarfon says that the fish that swallowed Jonah

was prepared from the dawn of creation itself for this purpose. Rabbeinu Bahya notes that the fish, described in 2:1 as being גדול (large) reflects not size but rather a “greatness in years”, dating back to the creation. He notes that this must be the case given that there were far larger fish in the sea that could have swallowed Jonah and therefore describing this one as “large” would hardly be essential information. Obviously, the fish was big – there are plenty of big fish! Further the use of the word ‘לבלע’ (to swallow) after introducing the fish tells us that the fish’s singular purpose was to swallow Jonah.

The question is – why? This is quite the effort to go to for the sake of a single man. Rabbi Tarfon’s statement gives the impression of Jonah’s fish journey as being one of the most pivotal in human history!

If we look at the fish as the vehicle for Jonah’s repentance more so than as a means for his survival, we can answer this question in a way that is relevant to those of us who have never been swallowed by a fish. If the fish is a unique method through which one can realise their mistakes and forge a new identity, then does the “uniqueness” of the fish perhaps reflects the unique and remarkable concept of repentance itself? Rav Soloveitchik in his lectures “On Repentance” particularly emphasises how repentance goes against what we traditionally would believe about how G-d operates – in which good is rewarded, and evil is punished. The idea that repentance can turn something bad into something good in retrospect is incredible; it gives a person the capacity to completely change direction, to pull themselves out of the darkest pit. Perhaps it is not too far to say that these texts describing the creation of a fish in conjunction also represent the

miraculous creation of repentance itself.

Q2: How did Jonah breathe in the belly of a fish?

The Abarbanel notes the particular difficulty of a lack of oxygen. How did Jonah breathe when he was inside the fish? He resolves this problem by arguing that Jonah entered a state analogous to a foetus growing within its mother. In the same way that a baby receives nutrition from the mother without direct access to air, so too Jonah was kept alive in such a state. The practical problems with such an interpretation abound. It begins to fall apart when one considers that foetuses do require oxygen and nutrition – they just receive it through the physical connection that they have with their mother. Perhaps this could be resolved by arguing that Jonah became physically attached to the fish, but this is not reflected in the text or in the Abarbanel itself.

This being the case, it raises the question as to why the Abarbanel would attempt to use the analogy of a foetus to describe Jonah's predicament. This is particularly accentuated given that the far simpler explanation that G-d stopped Jonah from needing oxygen is available, which avoids all of these issues.

The Malbim provides a similar answer but helps resolve this question by accessing the symbolic resonance of comparing Jonah to a foetus. The Malbim explains that Jonah was able to act like a foetus, surviving without direct exposure to oxygen, because he had already been “sentenced to death”, and therefore it was as if he was being “born again”.

If one considers the storm as Jonah's punishment; the reaction to his sins throwing his life into turmoil, his surrender to the sea is his attempt to begin the process of atonement. It is absolute; the Malbim describes it explicitly as a killing of the self. In that sense, the fish is not the punishment, but rather the crucible in which a “new” Jonah can be born. This makes comparisons to a foetus particularly apt.

Q3: Why Does the Language Change from 'דג' to 'דגה' in Describing the Fish?

There are two possible explanations to this, and they each reflect a different nuance of the journey of repentance.

The first is offered by Rashi. He suggests that the change from the masculine to the feminine form of the word means that Jonah was spat out from a male fish and was then swallowed by a female fish. He suggests this was because the male fish was more spacious and therefore Jonah was not yet motivated to pray to G-d, whereas the female fish was filled with embryos, which put him in a position of discomfort thus motivating his prayer.

Rashi's explanation, whilst navigating the change in words, does make one wonder what Jonah must have been thinking in the first fish. The suffering that being inside a fish entails encompasses far more than room. It was cold, it was terrifying, it was probably quite slimy. And he definitely knew that G-d was unhappy! Why was a second fish necessary?

What Rashi seems to be suggesting is that Jonah didn't reach his pivotal moment of change as soon as he arrived in the fish. He was so convinced of the rightness of his position and the preferability of his own death over fulfilling G-d's command, that this hellish nightmare was acceptable to him. It was only in the second fish, when G-d placed him in a position of physical trauma - where he could not move - that the switch was flipped. The mental understanding that G-d wanted him to change was not enough. It had to be something physical.

Rabbeinu Bahye explains the change by reference to other places in Tanakh, demonstrating that the word 'דגה' is often used to describe dead fish. He suggests that the fish may have died (having fulfilled its purpose in swallowing Jonah) and this was what motivated his prayer. He notes Jonah's later statement in 2:3 – “from the belly of שאול (Sheol) I have cried out” – the term itself used to reflect one's descent upon dying. The sentence takes on a brilliant double meaning: Jonah sees the fish as his grave, but the fish

itself, having died, is a larger grave in of itself.

Why is all of this necessary? Perhaps it reflects the pain that the crucible of repentance inevitably entails. A person can be so close to repentance, having surrendered themselves to change, and yet will need even more pressure to force themselves on. Both explanations reflect how the violence and trauma of the experience enables Jonah's journey through it into a greater self-realisation.

Q4: How Did Jonah Get Light When He Was Inside the Fish?

This question perhaps does not jump to mind. Yet we see that it is a question addressed in the earliest sources. There is a disagreement presented in the Pirkei DeRabbui Eliezer as to how Jonah was able to see within the fish. Rabbi Tarfon maintains that he was able to see through the eyes of the fish, which served as windows. Rabbi Meir meanwhile argues that it was through a pearl within the fish that was its own light source. He quotes from Tehillim 97:11 the verse: אור זרע לצדיק - "light is planted for the righteous". Why is this detail necessary?

My final suggestion here is that this idea of the light source is a vital counterpoint to the violence that was just described. Jonah may

have been pressured and in constant fear, but there was a source of light showing him the way, encouraging his repentance - planted for the righteous. Rabbi Rosner in his Shiur on this Perek noted that Rabbi Meir's interpretation specifically evokes how Noah used a pearl to provide light inside the Ark. In a time of total destruction, the light shows us the way forward, the way things can and should be, and will be again.

Conclusion

I will conclude this admittedly brief and incomplete analysis by noting the verse from Tehillim just mentioned - אור זרע לצדיק - "light is planted for the righteous", which we begin Yom Kippur by repeatedly chanting at increasing volumes as we prepare for what is about to come. Jonah's experience in the fish shows each of us how to repent, how the light is planted for every person to pull themselves out of the stormy oceans and onto dry land again. Every detail subtly reflects how in our journeys to rescue ourselves, there is nothing better to do than to throw yourself in and let the fish swallow you up.

כתיבה והתימה טובה. May we all merit to find our way out of the fish.



HaMagen