



How are we going to move forward this year?

“Through repentance, prayer and charity we can avert the severity of the decree”

The words above are amongst the most famous in the Yamim Noraim services and are taken from “Unetana Tokef”, that most beautiful and powerful piece of our liturgy which describes, what I think is, the essence of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. For me these words tell us what our aims should be in the coming year. And not only that. They are prefaced by those chilling words:

“On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who will live who will die. Who will be poor who will be wealthy?”

Of course, none of us knows what this coming year has in store for us. That is something well beyond our control. However, there are things which are within our control, things that we are able to do and which will make a difference not only to ourselves but also the world around us. These words about repentance, prayer and charity represent the ingredients with which we are told how we can make that difference and effect a change for the better.

Teshuva means the resolve to turn back to God

Let's just look at one of those ingredients. What does “teshuva” actually mean? We translate it as “repentance” but the truth is that this is a very loose translation. “Repentance” implies that we are full of sin and far away from G-d. It denotes negativity in our relationship with G-d. But, in reality the Hebrew word “teshuva” comes from the root word “shav” which means “to return.” Perhaps we are not so far away from G-d as we think. We were with G-d once but maybe things have gone a little wrong recently and so we need to come back home, so to speak.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, philosopher, great leader of modern orthodoxy and a man steeped in the traditions of the great yeshivot of Eastern Europe, taught that teshuva is like the centre point of a big circle. Wherever you are in that circle, said

the Rav, you can always turn towards the centre point. Wherever a Jew is, he or she can always come back to G-d. Similarly, the great Chassidic leader, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, said that teshuva is as far as east is from west: if you're standing in the west and you want to face east all you need to do is turn around. So, too, teshuva means making the resolve to turn back to Him. Nobody is saying that teshuva is easy but if we make the first move we can be assured that G-d will help us along the path. Our rabbis say that when it comes to making real changes G-d says:

“Open for me a hole the size of a needle and I will open it as wide as a huge hall.”

So, rather than signifying negativity, teshuva is an opportunity. An opportunity to draw ourselves closer to G-d, His Torah and His people. A wonderful opportunity to turn to Him and come back home. As they say, Yom Kippur isn't a time for beating ourselves up, it's a time for building ourselves up

I would suggest that there's a three- fold action plan to Teshuva:

First: let's look at ourselves, honestly, in our present situation. Are we doing everything we should be doing? Are there ways in which we can be better people? Better Jews?

Second: let's look at the past and make a resolution and recognise and regret the errors of any of our ways.

Third: let's make resolutions for the future. Let's resolve not to repeat the mistakes of the past. And, above all, let's mean it.

Past, present, future. Without this threefold action plan, the teshuva is not real. When we stand and say “Al Cheit” and beat our breasts for our past sins if we do not mean to change then it's just a cosmetic exercise. Indeed, our sages say the whole vidui- confession to G-d on Yom Kippur- is entirely pointless unless is accompanied by the intention to change and improve. However, the power of true teshuva is unlimited and our sages say that an honest and sincere teshuva even has the potential to turn past sins into merits.

One step at a time.....Everybody is counted in

We are blessed in Kenton with a wonderful, forward-looking community. Apart from our every day services which are part and parcel of what a shul is about, just consider, for example, our ReJewvenation programme-a wonderful Shabbat away, our celebration of Purim and the upcoming and exciting initiative when we will welcome our friends from Strassbourg for Shabbat in November. We have so much about which to be proud. And they say that Kenton is a declining community!

Finally, look at the box below to see the programme of educational activities that I have designed for 5777 and just let me offer a couple of words of explanation. Traditional Jewish learning is text based and so we're offering three shiurim in which

participants will engage with the three primary texts of Jewish life. Which are-Torah, Nach (Bible) and Talmud.

- Every Wednesday evening I will be giving a Talmud shiur in which we will be studying Tractate Chullin although, in fairness, I should say that participants should be gentlemen who have had some experience of Talmud study.
- Also on Wednesday evening, Rabbi Martin Taubman will be giving a shiur on the First Book of Samuel. Rabbi Taubman is an experienced teacher, currently teaching Jewish Studies at Hasmonean High School. Prior to that he taught at JFS and you may well remember that Rabbi Taubman was a most welcome guest of ours in Kenton at Shavuot. This is a shiur is for everyone. Although it will also be text-based, nobody need feel intimidated by a lack of Hebrew knowledge or by a lack of previous experience. All that you need is the will.
- On Shabbat mornings from 8.40 am to 9.10 am, I will be giving a parashat hashavua- sidra of the week-shiur. I promise you that it will be worth getting up for and like Rabbi Taubman's shiur, everyone is welcome.

Please join us in this venture. Here's an opportunity to make 5777 different and fulfil the great mitzvah of Talmud Torah-the study of Torah. Just choose a shiur, come along....and we'll do the rest.

And really finally,

Three point Action plan...

- Resolution. For those who are only coming to shul a few times a year, please try to come to shul a few more times. You will be most welcome and you never know - you might really enjoy coming.
- For those of you who are coming every Shabbat, please try to make a resolution to come during the week.
- Finally, even if you are a regular attendee at all of our services, you can always add more to whatever you are doing.

May this year 5777 be a year of health happiness and peace for all Israel. May we grow from strength to strength in all our endeavours. Amen.

Rabbi Black's Educational Programme-all starting in the autumn

Wednesday evenings 7.45- Talmud Shiur for men and
Rabbi Taubman's Shiur on Samuel (1) for men and women
Shabbat mornings before Davening- parashat ha'shavua Shiur. All are welcome.