A COLLECTION OF MESSAGES FOR

Rosh Hashanah

BY RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל

When Rosh Hashanah approached, Rabbi Sacks would craft short yet profound messages to Jewish communities. Drawing on key moments from the past year, these timeless insights – written during his time as Chief Rabbi and beyond – offered inspiration for the year ahead.

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

Celebrating the Miracle

Rosh Hashanah 5758/1997

Two events, one we have just celebrated, another we will celebrate during the course of the coming year, tell us how far the Jewish people has journeyed in modern times. The first is the Centenary of the First Zionist Congress in Basel. The second will be the fiftieth anniversary of the State of Israel.

These were both born in dark and difficult times. The First Zionist Congress was set against the background of a tidal wave of antisemitism sweeping through Europe, from the pogroms in Russia to the Dreyfus Affair in France. The birth of Israel followed the devastation of the Holocaust, and it was accompanied by war, as the countries on Israel's borders attempted to strangle the State at birth. We remember these things and grieve.

Yet together they represent one of the most remarkable events ever to have taken place in the history of a people. Powerless for almost two thousand years, the Jewish nation recovered its sovereignty. Exiled for two millennia, it regained its ancestral home. The Hebrew language was reborn. A scattered people was gathered together. A tormented, persecuted people found freedom at last.

Doubtless, for all these things a natural explanation can be given. But, for anyone with an iota of religious imagination, it was a miracle. More than three thousand years ago Moses uttered his most daring prophecy. Even before the Israelites entered the land for the first time, he warned them that they would suffer exile. But the day would come, he said, when "Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather and bring you back; He will bring you back to the land that belonged to your fathers."

For countless generations our ancestors prayed to witness that day. For them it was a dream. For us it is a reality – and it is wondrous in our eyes.

But there always was another dimension of return, and this must now be the highest item on our agenda as individuals and as a people. The prophets, without exception, foresaw that the return to the land would be accompanied by a return to the faith. Coming home to Israel meant coming home also to Torah. That is what the concept of *teshuvah* means in biblical Hebrew, geographical homecoming and spiritual homecoming combined.

The first century of Zionism was about building the Jewish land. The second century of Zionism must be about building the Jewish people. The physical task has been accomplished. The religious task remains. That means intensifying our Jewish learning and our Jewish living. It means that every child must have a Jewish education. The word *aliyah* means "ascent", and we now need a spiritual *aliyah*.

During these Ten Days of *Teshuvah* may each of us reflect on what we can do to make this come about – and may 5758 be a year of health and blessing, peace and prosperity for you, your families and the Jewish people. ■

Surviving and Thriving

Rosh Hashanah 5761/2000

In June this year the Queen opened the new Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum. It was an impressive ceremony, but a few weeks earlier Elaine and I had been there on a yet more moving occasion. Then, the people present were not the dignitaries of Anglo-Jewry but the survivors of the concentration camps, members of the 45 Group for whom the Shoah is more than history. It is personal memory.

It was a sombre but strangely uplifting experience. Whenever I've had the privilege of meeting this group I've always been struck by their tenacious hold on life. I can't begin to understand the inner strength it takes to be a survivor, but it is awe-inspiring, and it prompts a question.

People ask many questions about the Holocaust. Where was God? Where was man? How could it have happened? But one set of questions is rarely if ever asked. How did the survivors survive, knowing what they knew, seeing what they saw? How did the Jewish people survive? And not merely survive but accomplish some of the most astonishing achievements of our four-thousand-year history – building the State of Israel, fighting its wars, rescuing threatened Jewries throughout the world, and reconstructing communities, schools and yeshivot, so that today the Jewish people lives again and the sound of Torah is heard again. From where did Jews find the strength to do these things?

Who can know? Perhaps every story is different. But I sense something momentous beneath the surface of these events. The only word that does justice to it is faith – not conventional faith, not Maimonides' Thirteen Principles, but something that lies almost too deep for words. I call it faith in life itself.

What a strange idea. Faith in life? Doesn't everything that lives, seek to continue? Isn't the desire for life the most basic of all drives? Yes and no. It is for simple organisms. But human beings are blessed and cursed with imagination. There are things that can deaden or destroy our appetite for life. Not all are as harsh as the Holocaust. They can be quite simple – the belief that nothing we can do will make a difference, that life has no overarching meaning, that we are the random products of genetic mutation, that we are cosmic dust on the surface of infinity. A culture can lose its appetite for life. It happens when most people, most of the time, seek a succession of modes of forgetfulness – work, consuming, the pursuit of pleasure, a succession of moments in which we make ourselves too busy to ask the most fundamental question, Why are we here?, because we suspect it has no answer.

Jews and Judaism survived because we never lost our appetite for life. Much of Judaism is about holding life in your hands – waking, eating, drinking – and making a blessing over it. Much of the rest – *tzedakah* and *gemillat chassadim* – is about making life a blessing for other people. And because life is full of risk and failure, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we have a chance to make good our failures and begin again. Jews are not optimists. We know only too well that the world is full of conflict and hate. But to be a Jew – to know that we have free will, that we can change, that we can apologise and forgive and begin again – is never to lose hope. Judaism is about sanctifying life and having faith in it. And there are times – that evening spent with the survivors was one – when that faith is little less than awesome.

That is the meaning of those simple, but perhaps not so simple, words: "Remember us for life, O King who delights in life, and write us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, O God of life." ■

Renewing our Days

Rosh Hashanah 5762/2001

The ten days that begin the Jewish year are a period of spiritual accounting. We look back and ask, "What did we do with God's most precious gift, the gift of time?" We do this personally as individuals, but we also do it collectively as a community. We ask God to remember the good, forgive the bad, and give us the inner strength to do better in the future. Where have we been as a community?

Ten years ago, I asked British Jewry to join in creating a Decade of Jewish Renewal. The key phrase was, *Chadesh yameinu k'kedem*, "Renew our days as of old." These words occur at the end of the saddest book of the Hebrew Bible, Eichah, the Book of Lamentations. In it, the prophet mourns the destruction of the Temple and the devastation that has befallen the people. Yet he ends on a note of hope. "Bring us back to You, O Lord, and we will return. Renew our days as of old."

In the months Elaine and I were in Jerusalem before taking up office, those words kept repeating themselves in my mind. In Israel I sensed the miracle of Jewish return. A mere three years after the Holocaust, our people had returned to the land of our beginnings and had begun life again, after a gap of almost two thousand years, as a sovereign nation. The realisation of the prophecy, though, was not complete. Jews had returned, but we had not yet "renewed our days as of old." That was the message I tried to convey to British Jewry.

Since then, the community has responded magnificently. There has been a genuine mood of renewal. There is much still to be done, but the new Jewish day schools have been built at an unprecedented rate. Adult education has flourished with events drawing crowds in their thousands. There has been a spate of creativity: a new Jewish paper, Jewish websites and radio programmes, social and cultural activities and new forms of outreach. New organisations have been born. Many shuls have experimented with explanatory, introductory and 'alternative' services. The activity levels of British Jewry have never been higher, and this is all the more remarkable given the backdrop of a community in numerical decline and a wider culture relentless in its secularity.

Abba Eban once called Jews "the people who don't take Yes for an answer." We are quicker to criticise than to praise. This is not a Jewish value. To the contrary, we are called on to see the good and give thanks for it. I want to give thanks to the hundreds of communities and thousands of individuals who have made our ancient faith young again, and to God for giving us the strength to do it.

We have begun a journal and we must continue it. It is no small thing to be a Jew. Each of us carries with us the hopes of a hundred generations of our ancestors and the destiny of generations not yet born. We are responsible to the Jewish past for the Jewish future, and much depends on how we carry that responsibility. We must constantly ask: How will what I/we do affect the quality

of Jewish life for our children? How can I help to write future generations into the book of Jewish life?

May the Almighty bless you, your families and the Jewish people with peace, with success, and with life. ■

The Power of Life

Rosh Hashanah 5763/2002

If we seek to understand what has made Judaism so remarkable a faith for so long, look at the biblical and prophetic readings for Rosh Hashanah. The New Year is the birthday of creation, a reminder of how the universe came into being. The natural choices for our Torah readings would therefore be the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. The obvious *haftarot* would be the passages from Isaiah which speak of God as architect and sovereign of the universe.

In fact we do neither of these things. Instead we think about the birth of children: on the first day, Ishmael, on the second, Isaac. In the first day's *haftarah*, Hannah's prayer for a child, in the second, Jeremiah's vision of Rachel "weeping for her children." Why these choices and this theme?

First, to teach us one of Judaism's greatest lessons – that a single life is like a universe. The birth of a child is no less miraculous than the creation of the world. We say this lightly, because we forget how revolutionary a doctrine it once was. Since the dawn of civilization, cultures have been willing to take life lightly – not only by way of abortion and euthanasia, but also in the course of violence, terror and war. To be a Jew is to know that no life can be taken lightly. Human life is the only thing on which God has set His image, His likeness, His seal.

Second, to teach us to look to the future even more than to the past. We sometimes forget that though Judaism was the first faith in history to make *remembering* a religious duty, it is a forward-looking faith. Unique among cultures, its golden age – messianic time – is not in the past but in the future. A religion that cherishes children is one that thinks of tomorrow even more than yesterday. It is a faith that gives a central place to hope.

The past year has been a difficult time for Jews throughout the world. The people of Israel have come under unprecedented attack, through a campaign of terror on their streets and a campaign of vilification in the media. A wave of antisemitism has swept across the world bringing in its wake burned schools, desecrated synagogues, and Jews fearful of wearing signs of their identity in case they are attacked. Sixty years after the Holocaust, these things are a reminder of how much humanity still has to learn.

What, if anything, could bring peace to the Middle East? It would be irresponsible to suggest that a conflict that has lasted so long and resisted so many initiatives could be solved suddenly and simply. Yet it is not wrong to suggest that two fundamental values are at stake. First is the sanctity of life. This means, if it means anything, that terror, the murder of innocent civilians and suicide bombings are evil. There is no other word.

Second, conflicts are fuelled by memories of the past – a sense of historic grievance, anger, rage, resentment, humiliation, a desire to bring back a time that is no more and perhaps, in truth, never was. Conflicts are resolved only when the parties agree to lay aside the past in favour of our yet more sacred duty to the future – to children and their prospects and to generations not yet born.

Much energy has been spent arguing who is at fault, who is the aggressor, who is to blame. Far too little, if any, has been spent on the quite different question of what duties human beings owe to their children. Among these are the following: not to use them as pawns in war, as human shields for sniper fire, as future suicide bombers; and not to teach them to hate those with whom they must one day learn to live.

Peace will come to the Middle East, and to the world, when we learn to value the sanctity of life and the importance of children, when we refuse to enlist them in our disputes, and instead choose to settle our disputes so that they may inherit a world without terror and fear. These are not small matters. On them, the fate of the twenty-first century may well depend. Therefore this year we pray: "O God of life, teach us to sanctify life, so that our children may celebrate life and write their chapter in the Book of Life." ■

Prayer as Partnership

Rosh Hashanah 5764/2003

We enter the New Year, this year as last, poised between hope and fear. The situation in Israel remains uncertain. Elsewhere, antisemitism is on the rise. The international arena is still tense: neither the campaigns in Afghanistan nor Iraq

have not ended the threat of terror of which the West has been aware since the attack on the World Trade Center two years ago. Individually, we live in an age of rapid and unpredictable change. In retrospect, ours will be called the Age of Uncertainty. Jews, however, are no strangers to uncertainty: our ancestors lived with it and still found themselves able to celebrate life. That in no small measure was due to the strength they gained through prayer, especially during the *Yamim Nora'im*. What, though, is prayer?

Josephus, who lived in the first century C.E. and witnessed the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans, tells us that the Jewish world at that time was divided into three groups: the Sadducees, the Essenes and the Pharisees. They differed in their view of fate. The Sadducees believed that history was made by human beings. The Essenes believed the opposite, that what happens is the result of Divine providence, not human choice. The Pharisees, guardians of rabbinic Judaism – our Judaism – and the sole group whose beliefs survived, thought that both were true: fate is an interplay between heaven and earth, Divine decree and human choice. That is what gave the Pharisees their distinctive view of prayer.

Tefillah is where heaven and earth meet in the human soul, and something new is born. For without the faith expressed in prayer, fear would prevail. Would we have the same courage to build, create and take risks if we believed that ultimate reality was deaf to our prayers, blind to our fate? But Judaism said more: just as we have faith in God, so God has faith in us. He has invited us to become His "partners in the work of creation". Prayer therefore is precisely that interaction between the infinite and the finite that, according to the Pharisaic sages long ago, shapes the course of our collective and individual lives. If we were Sadducees we would not need to pray. If we were Essenes, we would not need to do anything except pray. We would not need to act. Providence would do it for us. Both were wrong. We need to act, to do our share. God asks that of us. But when we act, we are not alone. If we have aligned our wills with His, God is with us.

So it was then. So it is now. Looking back on the birth of the State of Israel, indeed looking back on Jewish history as a whole, it is hard to disentangle the role of Providence and the acts and choices of individual Jews. In truth it is both. Jewish history – the most remarkable of any people on earth – is the story of God acting through human beings who acted because they had faith in Him. In Jewish history, as in our individual lives, heaven and earth, God and us, each play their part, in ways not always apparent at the time but which become clear in retrospect. Prayer is where heaven and earth meet and a new strength, greater than ourselves, is born.

May our prayers this year have a special depth and intensity. And may the Almighty hear our prayers, for ourselves and our families, for the Jewish people and the State of Israel, and for the world – and may He grant us health and fulfilment, blessing and peace. ■

A Celebration of Creation

Rosh Hashanah 5765/2004

One aspect of the service on Rosh Hashanah never ceases to fill me with wonder.

Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of creation. *Hayom harat olam*, we say in our prayers: "Today the world was born." What then – if we knew nothing of the prayers – would we expect to find as the biblical readings for the day?

My vote would be simple. From the Torah, the opening of Bereishit. "In the beginning God created…" And for the *haftarah*? What better than the last two chapters of Isaiah, "Behold I will create new heavens and a new earth"?

Opening the machzor I would find that my answer was logical but wrong. What, in fact, do we read on the first day of the New Year? From the Torah, the story of the birth of Isaac. For the *haftarah*, the birth of Samuel. Two stories of great women – Sarah and Hannah – who longed to have children, but could not, and were then blessed by God.

Why these two stories? Beautiful, certainly. But what is their connection with Rosh Hashanah? The answer tells us much about the extraordinary, humane, counter-intuitive vision at the heart of Jewish life.

The famous Mishnah in Sanhedrin states (Steven Spielberg used it in his film Schindler's List) that a single life is like a universe. "One who destroys a life is as if he destroyed a universe. One who saves a life is as if he saved a universe." *The birth of a human life is like the birth of the universe.* Rosh Hashanah is the festival of creation – and if you want to understand the ethical implications of creation, don't study astro-physics. Think of the birth of a child.

Throughout the centuries, Judaism has been the most child-centred civilization in history. Only once does the Torah tell us why Abraham was chosen: "So that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord." Abraham was chosen for the sake of his children.

On the brink of the exodus, Moses gathers the people and addresses them (Exodus 12-13). He speaks about none of the things we would expect – freedom, the journey, the land of milk and honey. Instead he speaks three times about children: "And you shall tell your child on that day."

Children have been the casualties of our age. In the West they have suffered from the breakdown of marriage and the exploitations of a consumer culture. In the Middle East they have been used by the proponents of terror as cover for gunfire and, worse, used as suicide bombers. Where have been the voices of protest? Sadly there have been too few.

There are cultures that live in the present. Eventually, inevitably, they lose their way. There are cultures that live in the past. Nursing grievances, they seek revenge. Judaism is the greatest example in history of a culture that, while celebrating the present and remembering the past, lives for the future – and for its children.

If I were to choose one Jewish message for the world in these tense times, I would say: forget power, pride, violence, revenge, wealth, prestige, honour, acclaim – and instead ask one question: will our next act make the world a little better for our children?

That is the message of Rosh Hashanah – the day on which, to understand the universe, we think about the birth of a child. ■

Life is Precious

Rosh Hashanah 5766/2005

The past year has not been an easy one for Jews, the State of Israel or the world. It was the year of the tsunami. It was the year terror came to London with deadly effect. Israel became the subject of talk in academic and church circles about boycotts and disinvestment. But there were also more hopeful signs, not least the global support for an international programme of aid to Africa, Make Poverty History – a programme ultimately inspired by the biblical institutions of the sabbatical and jubilee years.

If there was a common theme to all these phenomena it was our inter-connectedness. Globalisation has made us vividly aware of the covenant of human solidarity that has existed, we believe, since the days of Noah. This is central to the themes of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Read the prayers for these days and you will see that they are markedly different from those of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. Those others are about Jewish history. On the Days of Awe, by contrast, we speak about the human situation as such: "Instil Your awe on all Your works … Let all You have made revere You … Let them all become a single society to do Your will with a full heart." Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are about the ultimate issues that affect us all: the sovereignty of God, the responsibility of humankind, and the impact of conscience on the future of the world.

Above all, they are about life and death. Four times in a single sentence we say, in each of our prayers at this time: "Remember us for life, O King who desires life, and write us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, O God of life." These words recall the great choice Moses posed as his own life was coming to an end: "This day I call heaven and earth to witness that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore choose life, so that you and your children may live." Judaism is supremely a religion of life.

Humanity is being faced with a series of stark choices in the 21st century. Will we continue to inhabit a world in which the few have unprecedented affluence while 30,000 people – most of them children – die every day from preventable disease? Will we continue to destroy the natural environment, putting the earth's climate at risk? Will terror etch life in the world's cities with fear? Will violence prevail over peaceful (even if painful) conflict resolution? These are issues of epic proportions. It is not surprising if many turn to the world's great religions for answers.

Judaism's greatness lies in the simplicity and humanity of its message. Life is precious. Human life is especially precious. The human person is the only thing in the vast universe on which God has set His image. Therefore we are commanded to celebrate and sanctify life, and to ensure, as far as lies within our power, that everyone has the basic necessities of life. We must preserve the viability of life on earth; and we must never yield to terror and its culture of death. The words of Moses have rarely been more urgent, and the choice now is as it was then. Will we, in the coming year, dedicate our lives to God and

the good? Will we enhance the lives of others? May God grant us the blessing of life, and may He help us turn our life into a blessing. ■

Global Responsibility

Rosh Hashanah 5767/2006

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we say: *tefillah* (prayer), *teshuvah* (penitence) and *tzedakah* (charity) avert the evil decree. No decree is final; no fate is inexorable. Our lives can become different, better. We can change.

We do so by changing our fundamental relationships. Prayer is our relationship with God. Penitence is our relationship with ourself. Charity is our relationship with others. If these change, we will find – not immediately, but ultimately – that our lives take on a sense of meaning and purpose they did not have before.

Teshuvah (penitence, or more literally "return") is something we recognise. Ours is a generation of *baalei teshuvah*, people who have found their way to tradition. Many today seek more Jewish content in their lives, not less. For the first time in centuries, children are often more religious than their parents.

Tzedakah, too, we understand. The Jewish community is generous to charitable causes out of all proportion to its numbers. Because of this, we support a greater range of services – schools, youth groups, welfare institutions, educational and cultural institutions – than at any previous time in the 350 years of British Jewry. We have enriched Jewish life and it has enriched us.

For many, though, *tefillah*, prayer, remains a problem. Often people tell me that they find synagogue services too long, too boring, too unintelligible. Later in the coming year I will be presenting our community with the gift of a new siddur with a new translation and commentary. I will be asking all our communities to undertake activities designed to deepen our understanding of Jewish prayer. We all need ways to find God, and prayer helps us focus on living in His presence.

Prayer, *tefillah*, *davenning*, can be a transformative experience. It has helped me through difficult times. Natan Sharansky has told the moving story of how the Book of Psalms given to him by his wife Avital helped him to survive his years of imprisonment by the KGB. I have heard from Holocaust survivors how prayer gave them strength in the time of darkness. And there is by now a large body of medical research showing the positive effects regular attendance at a house of worship has on health and even longevity.

The eleventh century poet Judah Halevi said that prayer is to the soul what food is to the body. Starve the body of food and it grows weak. Starve the soul of prayer and it withers. Prayer is our "Bluetooth" connection to the Divine creative energy at the heart of being. To pray is to discover that we are here for a reason. Our existence is not an accident. The universe is not deaf to our hopes and fears. When we speak from the depths of our soul, what we say is heard and heeded. "God is close to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth."

In these difficult, uncertain, stressful times we need the strength that comes from prayer. It sustained our ancestors through some of the hardest challenges ever faced by a people – and it will sustain us. In the year to come, may God give us the courage and confidence to pray from the heart, the wisdom and understanding to pray with the mind, and may He hear our prayers, writing us, our families, and our people in the Book of Life. ■

Facing an Era of Change

Rosh Hashanah 5768/2007

This past year things have not gone easily for Jews, for Israel or the world. In Britain there has been a continuing campaign of demonisation against Israel. Elsewhere terror and violence have reduced entire countries to what Hobbes called "the war of every man against every man" in which life is "nasty, brutish and short". What is it that we are living through?

The answer is change. Of all things, change – massive, rapid and systemic – is the hardest to live through. We crave the familiar. We need stability. Change is a form of bereavement. We lose the world we once knew.

When epoch-making change occurs, there are violent upheavals. It happened in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries after the invention of printing. It happened again in the twentieth century as an after- effect of the industrial revolution. It is happening in our time in the aftermath of globalisation, one of the most profound changes in the history of civilization.

Change creates crises of many kinds, but of these, the most important is spiritual. When timeless values are

being threatened, do we react by fighting change, if necessary by violence? Do we simply yield to it? Or is there a third possibility? Strangely enough, that is the theme of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The Hebrew word for year, *shanah*, comes from a root that also means two apparent opposites: "to change" and "to repeat". It embodies the paradox of time. On the one hand there are certain cycles – the seasons, the phases of life – that repeat themselves endlessly. On the other, there is change, sometimes profound and irreversible. We cannot go back to the way things were before computers, mobile phones or nanotechnology. Hence we need the inner resources to deal with the uncertain and the unpredictable.

Judaism's answer is summed up in three words in one of the key prayers on these holy days: *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*. *Teshuvah*, penitence, means that in an uncertain world we make mistakes, but we acknowledge them, apologise, set ourselves to do better next time, and move on. *Tefillah*, prayer, means that we are not alone. God is with us as we journey to our unknown destination. *Tzedakah*, charity and justice, means that we are there to help those who suffer as a result of change. Some benefit, others lose, and we are commanded to help those who lose.

Judaism is our internal compass, showing us the direction even when we lack a map. It is no coincidence that the holiest object in Judaism is a Sefer Torah, something portable. In the tabernacle and Temple, the carrying poles were never removed from the ark, so that the Torah was always ready to accompany the Israelites even if they had to move suddenly. Jews have long known insecurity, and we are prepared for it. For though the world changes, our values do not. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the two festivals of time itself, are an education in how to face the future without fear.

So, whether we face anti-Zionism or wider antisemitism or more personal difficulties, it is during these days that we gather the inner strength to do so in the confidence of trust and faith. The values Judaism taught – the sanctity of life, the dignity of the individual and the imperative of peace – remain as compelling today as they did when Moses first communicated them. We are not alone. God is with us. So we travel through the wilderness of time without trepidation, without anxiety, without fear. Our values, our faith, our way of life, do not change. That is why we can cope with change, neither fighting it nor being intimidated by it.

This year let us pray with added fervour for peace: for Israel, for our extended family the Jewish people, and for the world. Let us open our hearts to the Divine presence, that we may face the future without fear. May the God of life write you, and Israel, and humankind in the Book of Life. ■

Finding Strength

Rosh Hashanah 5769/2008

As I write these words, the world – not just the Jewish world – is facing a period of turbulence and uncertainty. The international political situation is hard to read; the economic situation harder still. We face recession; no one knows whether this will deepen into depression. "These are the times", said Paine, "that try men's [and women's] souls".

Wrestling with this challenge, I found my mind going back to a Rosh Hashanah long ago, in the mid fifth century B.C.E. The Babylonian exile was over. Many Jews had returned. The Second Temple had been rebuilt. Yet there was no miraculous transformation in the situation of Jews. They continued to face enemies without and divisions within. Outmarriage was high. A significant part of the population was deeply assimilated. Half could not even speak Hebrew (Neh. 13:24).

That Israel survived at all at this time was due to two remarkable leaders, the statesman-diplomat Nehemiah and the scholar-teacher Ezra. They realised that something radical had to be done to give the nation the strength to endure: not military or political but spiritual. The people needed a clear identity, a framework of values, a set of beliefs, a way of life. The national imperative was, in short, a return to Torah and a renewal of the covenant between the Jewish people and God.

On Rosh Hashanah they gathered the people before the Water Gate in Jerusalem. Ezra read the Torah to them. Educators were placed throughout the crowd to explain what was being said. The people, realising how far they had drifted from their mission, began to weep. It was then that Nehemiah said words that, for me, contain one of the secrets of Jewish survival. He said: "This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep … Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh. 8: 9–10).

Let those words echo in the mind: "the joy of the Lord is your strength".

Jews never lost the capacity to rejoice. At times of poverty and oppression, they celebrated Shabbat and the festivals as if they were royalty. They studied, like aristocrats of the mind. They celebrated weddings as if they had no care in the world. I sensed that same resilience in Israel throughout the difficult years of suicide bombings, Katyushas and Kassams. The strength of the Jewish people is that we never allowed our enemies to rob of us of our ability to laugh, and celebrate, and say *Lechaim*, and sing. Nehemiah, the shrewd statesman, was right. "The joy of the Lord is your strength".

It is not easy to rejoice in hard times. It calls for real disciplines of body and mind. It needs habits of gratitude, rituals of giving thanks, sacred times when we stop thinking of what we lack and instead focus on what we have. It means celebrating family and home and children, love and friends and community. That is what Judaism trains us to do. Half its rituals are about celebrating and sanctifying life. Rosh Hashanah is a sustained prayer for life.

There have been civilizations that worshipped power, wealth, art, science, victory in war, dominance over others, privilege, hierarchy, superiority. Judaism found joy in life itself: life in love, life in community, life in the birth of a child, the life that flows through the generations as we honour the past and cherish the future. Jews knew that you could lose all else and still celebrate life.

In life we find God. His is the breath we breath, the call we hear, the forgiveness we feel, the strength we need. No other religion has so focused on and sanctified the blessing of being. This sustained our people in the past. May it sustain us in the coming year. May God bless us all with life, and health, and peace. ■

Turbulent Times

Rosh Hashanah 5770/2009

At times like the current recession we need more than ever to reflect on the questions Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur pose to us. What do we live for? What are our values and how do we translate them into life? What will we give our children and those who will live on after us? For what do we wish to be remembered? What chapter will we write in the Book of Life?

It is easy to be lured by the siren song of a consumer society and come to believe that what matters is how much we earn and what we can afford. All around us are promises of happiness if we buy this, acquire that.

Yet the overwhelming consensus of psychological research is that, beyond the basic minimum we need, there is little correlation between wealth and happiness, between what we own and the way we feel. Even those who have won great sums in a lottery are, on average, no happier a year later than they were before they won. The excitement and delight of material things is very short-lived.

All the more so does this apply within the family. I once sat with one of Britain's most successful businessmen while he told me how unfair it was that his marriage had failed. He had, he said, given his wife everything; yet it was clear that what he had given her was possessions. What he hadn't given her was time. He was so obsessed with work that he failed to understand how neglected she felt.

I lose count of the number of parents who have told me a similar story about their children. "I gave them so much," they say. "How could they be so ungrateful?" But you cannot buy a child's affection. That needs something else altogether: care, attention, recognition, time spent talking together, doing things together, and yes, studying together.

Judaism is an extraordinary set of disciplines for living a meaningful life – and it is meaning, not fame or success, that lies at the heart of happiness. It invites us through the blessings we say every morning to give thanks for simply being alive in a universe full of beauty and wonder. It forces us, one day in seven, to rest and enjoy what we have rather than worry about the things we do not yet have. On Shabbat we renew the love within the family. We celebrate being part of a community – the place where our joys are doubled and our grief halved by being shared with others.

On the festivals we relive our people's history, the most remarkable history of any nation on earth. Through *kashrut* we sanctify the act of eating. Through *mikvah* and the laws of family purity we etch our most intimate relationship with the charisma of holiness. Spending time studying the texts of our tradition, we endow with religious significance the life of the mind. In prayer we converse with God, aligning ourselves with the moral energy of the universe, becoming part of the four-thousand-year-old symphony of the Jewish soul.

We can lose material possessions, but spiritual possessions – the good we do, the love we inspire – we never lose, and that is why they are the greatest investments we can make. May we, in this coming year, spend more time on the things that matter, the things Judaism teaches us to value, and may God write all of us in the Book of Life. ■

Standing Together

Rosh Hashanah 5771/2010

This year, Israel needs our prayers.

One of the enduring features of Jewish spirituality is that we relate to God as a people, not simply as individuals in search of salvation. It was as a people that our ancestors were rescued from Egypt, as a people that they made a covenant with God, and as a people that we have lived out our destiny ever since.

Once a year, on Yom Kippur, the High Priest would seek forgiveness for the entire people. And though we have not had a Temple for almost 2000 years, still we confess together. We say "We have sinned," not "I have sinned." The same is true for other prayers. When we pray for people who are ill, we ask that the sufferer be healed "along with others in Israel who are sick." When we comfort mourners, we say, "May God comfort you together with the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." Our destinies are interlinked. A tragedy for one is a tragedy for all. As the sages said, "All Israel are responsible for one another."

The eternal symbol – and today the living reality – of that collective existence is the land and the State of Israel. In the 4000 years since the days of Abraham and Sarah, it is the only place where Jews have ever had the chance to construct a society according to our own principles and beliefs, to govern ourselves, defend ourselves, and live a collective life.

Israel is built into the very idea of *teshuvah*, which means not "repentance" but "return." All the prophets who experienced or foresaw exile, saw the Jewish return to the land as an essential accompaniment to the Jewish return to the faith. Our connection to the land is more than merely political. It is written in to the very terms of Judaism as a faith, the West's oldest faith.

Since the day it was born, 62 years ago, Israel has been under assault. Hardly a year has passed without war or the threat of war, terror or the threat of terror. But today its very legitimacy – its right to be, and to defend itself – is under attack. Israel has become the Jew among the nations, an international pariah, charged, as Jews were charged in the Middle Ages, with demonic crimes and wild accusations. It is hard not to see this as the continuation, in a new form, of an ancient and terrible history about which the world once said, "Never again."

Israel needs our prayers. It has achieved great things. It has rescued threatened Jews across the world. It has turned Hebrew, the language of the Bible, into a living tongue. It has built centres of Jewish learning unparalleled since the days of the Mishnah. Today we can say, with the prophet, "From Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." Born a mere three years after the Jewish people walked through the valley of the shadow of death, it represents a momentous affirmation of life.

Please, in the days and weeks ahead, hold Israel in your prayers. Its people are our people. Its land is the only land Jews have known as home in the sense given by the poet Robert Frost: "the place where, when you have to go there, they have to let you in." In the coming year may God bless the people of Israel in the Land of Israel with security, tranquillity and peace, and may He write us all in the Book of Life. ■

The Power of Prayer

Rosh Hashanah 5772/2011

"Penitence, prayer and charity avert the evil decree." We say those words at one of the climaxes of our worship on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. For centuries our ancestors said those words, knowing what each of them means.

Penitence defines our relationship with ourselves. *Prayer* is part of our relationship with God. *Charity* is about our relationship with other people. We still know what it is to be penitent. We fall short, make mistakes, and seek forgiveness. And we know what it is to be charitable. We remain a generous community, giving out of all proportion to our numbers.

But for many, prayer has become difficult. They find it hard to connect to the synagogue service or to the prayers themselves. Too few people nowadays find prayer meaningful, especially on the High Holy Days when the prayers are long and complicated.

That is why, together with a wonderful team, I've undertaken a new project that I hope will make a difference. We've created a new Rosh Hashanah machzor. Of course, in Judaism, the word "new" is relative. The Hebrew stays the same. But everything else is different: the translation, the introduction, the commentary, and the actual physical appearance of the machzor.

We think this is a first in Anglo-Jewish history. The siddur – familiarly known as "the Singer's" – has always been produced by Chief Rabbis, but not the machzor, "the Routledge". We felt the time had come for this to change.

Prayer has to speak to us if it is to speak to God. We have to be able to understand it if we are to put into it our heart and soul.

In the translation, we've tried to bring out the poetry and power of the prayers. In the introduction, we explain the meaning and history of Rosh Hashanah.

In the commentary, we've provided not just explanation but also reflection on what these holy days mean for our lives. Eventually we hope to bring out machzorim for the other festivals as well.

Prayer matters. It's our conversation with God. Imagine having a relationship with your spouse, your child or your parent, in which you never speak to them. It can't be done. A relationship without words is almost a contradiction in terms. So it is with God.

When we converse with God – when we pray – we enter into a relationship with the Force that moves the universe, the Voice that spoke to our ancestors, the Power that shaped our history as a people, the Presence that still listens to our hopes and fears, giving us the courage to aspire and the strength to carry on.

Prayer makes a difference. It's our way of giving thanks for the good in our lives and of enlisting God's help as we wrestle with the bad. It's our regular reminder of the world beyond the self, of the ideals and aspirations of our people. When we pray we speak with the words of our ancestors, joining the great choral symphony of the Jewish people throughout the ages and the continents. True prayer, said from the heart, has the undiminished power to make us feel that "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for You are with me."

May we, this year, pray from the heart. May our prayers be answered, and may it be for you, your families, and the Jewish people, a good and sweet New Year. ■

Renewing Prayer

Rosh Hashanah 5773/2012

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are times for stock-taking, individually and collectively. As we pray for God's blessings for the future, we reflect on the past: where we have come from, how far we have travelled, and what remains to be done.

As I think back personally to the day 21 years ago when I became Chief Rabbi, my overwhelming feeling is one of thanks and indebtedness to a community that has renewed itself beyond expectation.

Most spectacular has been the growth in education. There have been more new Jewish day schools opened in the past two decades that in any comparable period in the 356-year history of Anglo-Jewry. The percentage of Jewish children at Jewish day schools has moved from some 25 per cent to almost 70 per cent. This is an immense achievement on the part of many people: builders, funders, governors, teachers, parents and children. Together they have given us a future to be proud of.

Nor has the growth in education been confined to schools. There has been an explosion of adult, family and informal education. Never before has there been so much learning taking place in our community. We are better Jewishly educated than we were, and our children and grandchildren will be yet more so.

Then there has been the creativity and exuberance of Jewish life in general. I think of the new London Jewish Cultural Centre, the London Jewish Community Centre currently being built, and events like Jewish Book Week that attract ever larger crowds. Most of our synagogues are no longer simply houses of prayer. They have become community centres with active and dynamic programmes of all kinds.

Jewish welfare organisations like Jewish Care, JBD, Norwood, Nightingale House, Langdon and others throughout the country have achieved unparalleled standards of excellence. *Chessed* activities thread through almost all of our organisations and schools, and Mitzvah Day has inspired other faith communities, becoming this year a national project backed by the government.

The Jewish voice has become a significant part of the national conversation on moral and social issues, listened to respectfully by people of all faiths or none. Even the demography of Anglo-Jewry has changed. Having declined year-on-year for 60 years, in 2005 the tide began

to turn, largely thanks to the growth of the Haredi community. We are now growing, albeit slowly.

And yes, there are negatives: the growth of antisemitism and the various campaigns against Israel. But Britain remains, for the most part, a tolerant society. Jews and Judaism are admired, and in the fight against prejudice we have good and often courageous friends. Were our Victorian predecessors 150 years ago to see us now, they would be frankly astonished at the richness and exuberance of Jewish life.

Lo alecha hamelachah ligmor: It is not for us to complete the task, but neither have we desisted from it, and together we have achieved great things. Our children and grandchildren will have new challenges to face, but they will do so with more knowledge and confidence than any Anglo-Jewish generation in the past.

So let us give collective thanks to God *shehecheyanu vekiyemanu vehigiyanu lazman hazeh*, who has brought us safely to this day. May the *shofar* of Rosh Hashanah summon us to yet greater achievements. May we remain true to our faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith. May God write us and our families in the Book of Life. ■

Choosing Life

Rosh Hashanah 5775/2014

5774 was the year when it became dangerous to be a Jew. Israel, subject to sustained missile attack, discovered how hard it is to fight an asymmetric war against a terrorist group ruthless enough to place rocket launchers beside schools, hospitals and mosques. It found itself condemned by large sections of the world for performing the first duty of any state, namely to protect its citizens from danger and death.

Antisemitism returned to the streets of Europe. 120 years after the Dreyfus trial, the cry "Death to the Jews" was heard again in Paris. 70 years after the Holocaust, the call of "Jews to the gas" was heard in the streets of Germany. There were times when it felt as if the ghost of a past we thought long dead had risen to haunt us. More times than was comfortable I heard Jews say, "For the first time in my life I feel afraid."

Let us stay with those fears and confront them directly. We are not back in the 1930s. To the contrary, for the first time in the almost four thousand years of Jewish history, we have simultaneously independence and sovereignty in the Land and State of Israel, and freedom and equality in the Diaspora. Israel is strong, extraordinarily so. The success of Iron Dome was the latest in an astonishing line of technological advances – not just military but also agricultural, medical and commercial – designed to protect, save and enhance life.

Israel has lived with the disdain of the world for a very long time. Given that it is the only fully functioning democracy in a Middle East where elsewhere entire nations are brutally tearing themselves apart, that is a problem for the world as much as for Israel. Besides which we know, even the most lukewarm among us, that it is infinitely preferable to have a State of Israel and the condemnation of the world than no Israel, no Jewish home, and have the sympathy of the world.

The unity Israel showed during the Gaza conflict was deeply moving. It reminded us that in a profound existential sense we remain one people. Whether or not we share a covenant of faith, we share a covenant of fate. That is a good state to be in as we face the *Yamim Nora'im*, when we stand before God not just as individuals but as a people.

As for antisemitism, rarely has it been more self-evident that the hate that starts with Jews never ends with Jews. The most significant enemies of the Jews today are the enemies of freedom everywhere. Worldwide we may feel uncomfortable, anxious. But there are parts of the world where Christians are being butchered, beheaded, driven from their homes and living in terror.

As for Muslims, one prominent academic recently estimated that of the hundreds dying daily, at least 90 per cent were doing so at the hands of their fellow Muslims. Bahai are at risk. So are the Yazidis. So in parts of the world are Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and for that matter atheists. No historian looking back on our time will be tempted to call it the age of tolerance.

Which brings us back to the *Yamim Nora'im*. There is a note of universality to the prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that we do not find on other festivals.

On other festivals the key section of the Amidah begins, *Atah bechartanu mikol ha'amim*, "You chose us from among all the nations." The emphasis is on Jewish singularity.

On the *Yamim Nora'im* the parallel prayer begins, "And so place the fear of Lord our God, over all that You have made… so that all of creation will worship You." The

emphasis is on human solidarity. And human solidarity is what the world needs right now.

One message resonates through these days: life. "Remember us for life, King who delights in life, and write us in the Book of Life for Your sake, God of life."

We sometimes forget how radical this was when Judaism first entered the world. Egypt of the Pharaohs was obsessed with death. Life is full of suffering and pain. Death is where we join the gods. The great pyramids and temples were homages to death.

Anthropologists and social psychologists still argue today that the reason religion exists is because of people's fear of death. Which makes it all the more remarkable that – despite our total and profound belief in *olam haba* and *techiyat hametim*, life after death and the resurrection of the dead – there is almost nothing of this in most of the books of Tanach. It is an astonishing phenomenon. All of Kohelet's cynicism and Job's railing against injustice could have been answered in one sentence: "There is life after death." Yet neither book explicitly says so.

To the contrary, King David said in a psalm we say daily: "What gain would there be if I died and went down to the grave? Can dust thank You? Can it declare Your truth?"

Almost at the end of his life Moshe Rabbeinu turned to the next generation and said to them: "Choose life, so that you and your children may live." We take this for granted, forgetting how relatively rare in the history of religion this is.

Why so? Why, if we believe the soul is immortal, that there is life after death and that this world is not all there is, do we not say so more often and more loudly? Because since civilization began, heaven has too often been used as an excuse for injustice and violence down here on earth.

What evil can you not commit if you believe you will be rewarded for it in the world to come? That is the logic of the terrorist and the suicide bomber. It is the logic of those who burned 'heretics' at the stake in order, so they said, to save their immortal souls.

Against this horrific mindset the whole of Judaism is a protest. Justice and compassion have to be fought for in this life not the next. Judaism is not directed to fear of death. It is directed to a far more dangerous fear: fear of life with all its pain and disappointment and unpredictability. It is fear of life, not fear of death, that have led people to create totalitarian states and fundamentalist religions.

Fear of life is ultimately fear of freedom. That is why fear of life takes the form of an assault against freedom.

Against that fear we say from the beginning of Ellul to Sukkot that monumental psalm of David (Ps. 27): "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom then shall I be afraid?"

On Rosh Hashanah we blow *shofar*, the one mitzvah we fulfil by the breath of life itself without needing any words. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the "anniversary of creation," we read in the Torah and *haftarah* not about the birth of the universe but about the birth of Isaac to Sarah and Samuel to Hannah as if to say, one life is like a universe. One child is enough to show how vulnerable life is – a miracle to be protected and cherished. On Yom Kippur we wear the *kittel*, a shroud, as if to show that we are not afraid of death.

Never before have I felt so strongly that the world needs us to live this message, the message of the Torah that life is holy, that death defiles, and that terror in the name of God is a desecration of the name of God.

The State of Israel is the collective affirmation of the Jewish people, a mere three years after emerging from the valley of the shadow of death, that *Lo amut ki echyeh*, "I will not die but live." Israel chose life. Its enemies chose the way of death. They even boasted, as did Osama bin Laden, that the love of death made them strong. It did not make them strong. It made them violent.

Aggression is not strength; it is a profound self-consciousness of weakness. And the main victims of Islamist violence are Muslims. Hate destroys the hater.

Today it is not just Israel or Jews whose freedom is at risk. It is the whole of the Middle East, large parts of Africa and Asia, and much of Europe. Therefore let us approach the New Year with a real sense of human solidarity. Let us show, by the way we celebrate our faith, that God is to be found in life. The love of God is love of life. Let us take to heart King David's insistence that faith is stronger than fear. No empire ever defeated the Jewish people, and no force ever will. May God write us, our families, the people and State of Israel and Jews throughout the world, in the Book of Life. And may the day come when the righteous of all nations work together for the sake of freedom, peace and life. ■

The Shofar's Call

Rosh Hashanah 5776/2015

"Original" is not a word often used in connection with a code of Jewish law. In general, the rule tends to be that if it's true it isn't new, and if it's new it isn't true. But "original" is precisely the right word to use in connection with Moses Maimonides' law code the Mishneh Torah, especially in connection with Rosh Hashanah. Maimonides was the first halachist to create a work called Hilchot Teshuvah, the Laws of Repentance. One law in particular (3:4) is stunning in its originality, as well as in its implications for us.

It begins with these words. "Even though the sounding of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is a scriptural decree, nonetheless it contains within it a hint (as to its purpose), namely: Wake you sleepers from your sleep, and you slumberers from your slumber, examine your deeds, return in repentance and remember your Creator, you who forget the truth in the follies of time and waste the whole year in vain pursuits that neither profit nor save."

What is original about this is that in the Talmud, the explanation given for the *shofar* is that it reminds us and God of the ram offered in place of his son by Abraham at the binding of Isaac. The sound of the *shofar* itself, *teruah*, represents, according to the Talmud, the sound of tears. In other words, as we stand before God in judgment we ask Him to remember the sacrifices we and our ancestors made for His sake. The *shofar* is our cry to God.

Maimonides says the opposite. The *shofar* is God's cry to us. It is God's way of saying what He said to the first humans in the Garden of Eden: "Where are you?" What have you done with the life, the freedom and the blessings I gave you? This is a unique Maimonidean insight. What, though, does he mean when he says, "you who forget the truth in the follies of time and waste the whole year in vain pursuits that neither profit nor save"?

This past year the brilliant New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote a national best seller, The Road to Character, a work based in part on Rav Soloveitchik's famous essay, The Lonely Man of Faith. Applying Rav Soloveitchik's ideas to contemporary culture, he distinguishes between what he calls the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues.

The résumé virtues are the ones we write on our curriculum vitae, our achievements, our qualifications, our skills. But it is the eulogy virtues that are the ones for which we will be remembered. Are we kind, honest, faithful? What are the ideals for which we live, and how do we live them? These are not what we write on our résumé, but they make all the difference to our quality of life and the impact we have on those around us.

"We live," he writes, "in a society that encourages us to think about how to have a great career, but leaves many of us inarticulate about how to cultivate the inner life." That is not a million miles from what the Rambam meant when he spoke about wasting time on vain pursuits that neither profit nor save: not that résumé virtues are unimportant, but they are not all-important. The relentless pressure on us to succeed in the commercial market-place gives us all too little time and encouragement to develop the depths of character that make all the difference to the quality of our relationships, our sense of a meaningful life, and the love we give and receive.

That, says the Rambam, is what the *shofar* is calling us to, and it is what Rav Soloveitchik meant by "Adam II," the covenantal personality, us in our relationship with God. Living the life of Torah is about acquiring the eulogy virtues: humility, gratitude, integrity, joy, the willingness to serve and make sacrifices in the name of high ideals. It is about "charity, love and redemption."

Even today, Brooks writes, you come across individuals who "seem to possess an impressive inner cohesion." They are not leading "fragmented, scattershot lives." They are grounded, they have roots, they know what matters in the long run, and they can tell the difference between the music and the noise. The result is that they are not "blown off course by storms," nor do they "crumble in adversity." They radiate, he says, "a sort of moral joy." They are not defeated by failure or wounded by criticism. They have a massive internal strength and they make a real difference to those whose lives they touch.

That defines the *cheshbon hanafesh*, the self-searching and self-evaluation that should inform our thoughts on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the days between. That, according to Maimonides, is what the *shofar* is calling us to. And that, surely, is a message for our time.

None of us, as individuals, can end global warming, bring peace to the Middle East, or bring justice and compassion to the international arena. But we can, quietly, develop the strengths of character that will make a difference not only to our own lives but to those around us. That, according to the Rambam (in his Eight Chapters) is what Judaism is about, the cultivation of

character through the repeated acts we call *mitzvot* and the way of life we call *halachah*. That is where Judaism is so rich and transformative, and where contemporary secular culture, with its focus on externalities and résumé virtues, is often sadly lacking.

Let us try this coming year to develop, through our Jewish living, those qualities of character that really are life-enhancing and that come from a sense of the Shechinah in our lives. The sages understood, none more so than Maimonides, that the best way to change the world is by changing ourselves. That is what the *shofar* is calling us to: to cultivate the inner life so that, through humility, forgiveness and love, we become vehicles through whom God's blessings flow. Let us learn to radiate moral joy. ■

Jonathan Sacks
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