

Celebrating Life

Transcripts from Rabbi Sacks' WhatsApp Group

Dear Friends,

During Elul and in the lead up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I posted a daily audio message on my 'Celebrating Life' WhatsApp group. The idea was to offer a short reflection on an aspect of this special and holy time in the Jewish calendar. Sometimes these reflections were focused on how we conduct ourselves as individuals and at other times they looked at specific elements of the prayers over the *Yamim Noraim*.

What started off as an experiment grew incredibly quickly. To date, over 16,000 people have joined one of the WhatsApp groups, creating a wonderful online community of learning and a sense of *achdut* between Jews from all over the world.

Ahead of Yom Kippur, the holy of holies of Jewish time, we have collated the transcripts of all the WhatsApp messages sent since Rosh Chodesh Elul in the pages that follow. We hope that as you read (or re-read) them, you will reflect on the ideas they contain and allow them to enhance your davening during Yom Kippur.

We have been thrilled with the feedback on this WhatsApp initiative and plan to put out further reflections during Sukkot and at other key moments in the Jewish year. If you are not already a member of one of the groups and would like to be, please visit www.RabbiSacks.org/WhatsApp; we would be honoured to have you join us.

Together with Elaine and our office team, I wish you and your family a *G'mar Chatima Tova*. May it be a very meaningful and transformative experience for us all.



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COMING HOME

*Sent on 1st Elul / 1st September
Rosh Chodesh Elul*

What is Elul? One way of putting it, I suppose, would be to say: think of it as God sending us a WhatsApp message saying, how are you? Are you okay? I haven't heard from you in a while. I miss you.

That's what makes the Jewish idea of *Teshuvah* so beautiful, so unlike anything that we conventionally associate with religious ideas of sin, guilt and penitence. We don't believe in original sin. To the contrary, we believe that our natural instinct is to live in harmony with other people, with the universe, and with God. But sometimes we lose our way. We drift. We do things we know we shouldn't. And the sound of the shofar, that we begin to blow during Elul, is a call, saying, come back. *Teshuvah* literally means coming back, coming home.

One of the most beautiful ideas that the mystics formulated about this month is that they related the Hebrew word Elul to the initial letters of the phrase from the Song of Songs: "*ani ledodi vedodi li.*" "I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me." That makes *Teshuvah* an act of love, a coming together, a second honeymoon if you like between us and the Divine Presence. The *Shekhinah*.

I don't know about you, but I do know that I have things to put right in my life. I suspect we all do. It's just that without Elul, would we ever really get around to doing it? The genius of Judaism is that it gives us this month in the year to think about where we are going, where we've gone off course, where we've failed in our duties, where we've upset other people, – and then begin to put them right, in the knowledge that the intense holiness of the

Yamim Noraim, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, will lift us to the heights and inspire us to be a bit better in the coming year, closer to God, and thereby closer to the person the world needs us to be.

So, think of it as a time of focus, of change, of personal growth, of spiritual rededication, of coming home. *Chodesh tov.*

ON BEING JEWISH

Sent on 2nd Elul / 2nd September

I have a little dream; it goes like this. You are wandering through an enormous library. It has millions of books and you're wandering through and you're looking at all the titles of the books, and then suddenly you stopped dead.

There's a book and on the title, it's got your name. You take it out and see what is this book that has your name written on it, and you open it up and you see that there are several hundred pages of that book written by many different hands in different languages. And you try and work out what this book is, and with a shock you realise that this book has been written by your ancestors.

Every single one of them has written a chapter in this book telling their story and handing it on to their children. And as you get to the end of the book, with a shock you see that that empty page has your name on it, and you realise that is the chapter that you have to write. Now you're in the middle of this library. Can you just put that book on the shelf and walk away and forget it?

I don't think you can really, because if you did, all those 200 generations of your ancestors would have kept that book going in vain because it would have stopped with you. I kind of think I couldn't do that. If

they put their faith in their children to keep the book going, then they have all put their faith in me, and I have to write my chapter in that book and when the time comes, give that book onto my children and grandchildren.

That is what it is to be a Jew. To be a Jew is to be part of the most remarkable story ever lived by any people, covering more countries, more adverse circumstances, more triumphs and tragedies than any other story. And then the sudden realisation that every one of us has a chapter to write in that story and hand the book on. That is what it is to be a Jew. And the second I realised that, I knew I couldn't walk away. I had to write my chapter and then give the book to my children and grandchildren.

FAILURE

Sent on 3rd Elul / 3rd September

It's one of my favourite stories, all the better for being true. A young chemist had been working for some time at developing a new bonding agent, a glue. Eventually the work was complete. He tried it out. It didn't stick. What's the use of a glue that doesn't stick? A failure. Time wasted. Effort spent in vain. Back to the laboratory to try again. So, ninety-nine out of a hundred people would have concluded. The young chemist was the one in a hundred who thought differently.

Instead of deciding that his work was a failure, he asked, "What if it's a success? What if I've discovered a solution? The only thing left to do is to find the problem." He refused to give up. He kept asking himself, What's the use of a glue that doesn't stick? Eventually he found it. It became a huge commercial success. I use it all the time. It's used for notes you can attach and detach at will. That's how the "Post-it Pad" was born.

I think of that story every time I hear someone write off their own or other people's efforts as a failure. That is not just negative thinking. It's destructive – of confidence, morale, self-respect. More importantly, it's not true, or at least, not the best way of seeing things.

Creation, by its very nature, involves taking risks – the experiment that fails, the attempt that doesn't quite come off. Each is part of the process that leads to discovery. Each is a learning experience. Analysing why something fails is often one of the most instructive exercises we can undertake. Creativity without failure is like being lifted to the top of a mountain without the climb. It's fun. But it isn't an achievement. "According to the effort," said the sages, "is the reward."

Nor are we, here, now, in a position to judge success. I think of Moses Maimonides, the great Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages. Late in life he wrote a book. It was, he tells us in one of his letters, written for a single disciple who had doubts about his faith. It took a long time. Maimonides was in those days a physician as well the leader of his community, and the hours were hard to find. Eventually he completed it and sent it to the young man. From his reply it's clear that it didn't work. Perhaps he didn't understand it. At any rate it didn't answer his questions. A failure in Maimonides' lifetime. The name of the book? *The Guide for the Perplexed*, the greatest work of Jewish philosophy ever written.

I think, too, of the first Moses. What would his obituary have been like, written by a contemporary? The evidence is there throughout the books that bear his name. When he intervened on behalf of his people, they complained. He hadn't made things better; he'd made them worse. In Egypt, their burdens were made heavier.

Leaving Egypt, they came up against the Red Sea. Crossing the sea, they found a desert. First there was no water. Then there was no food. Then the people complained there was no meat. Having given the Israelites the Ten Commandments they made a Golden Calf. Sending spies to prepare their entry into the land, they came back and said, it's impossible. Every effort he made to form a free and holy people collapsed. Nor was he privileged to set foot in the land to which he had spent forty years travelling. Can a life of failures be a success? Sometimes it can be the greatest life there is.

As we journey through Elul and look back over our year, we must remind ourselves of an important lesson: you have to make a blessing over failures too.

THE LOVE THAT SAYS NO
Sent on 4th Elul / 4th September

When I was Chief Rabbi, each year before Rosh Hashanah I used to make a television film for the BBC. It was an interesting challenge. 99.5 per cent of the viewers were not Jewish. Jews are only half a per cent of the population of Britain. Besides which, many, even most of them weren't religious believers at all. Britain is quite a secular society. So how do you explain to a non-Jewish non-religious audience what *teshuvah* is?

It occurred to me that one dramatic way of doing so was thinking about addiction. After all, to cure an addiction you have to go through most of the stages of *teshuvah*. You have to recognise that taking drugs is wrong: what we call *charatah*. You have to undertake to act differently in future: what we call *shinui maaseh*. And we have to be able to resist temptation when it comes our way again: what Maimonides defined as *teshuvah gemurah*, complete repentance.

So, I spent a day at a rehabilitation centre for heroin addicts. I found it incredibly moving. Here were kids, 16 to 18 years old. Most of them came from broken homes. Some had suffered abuse when young, others simply neglect. They'd had a terrible past. Trouble was, by seeking refuge in drugs they were going to have an even more terrible future.

The people running the centre were amazing, and they were changing lives. But to me the most remarkable moment happened while I was speaking to the head of the centre, a young woman with, I remember, pink hair and punk clothes. Yet when she spoke *Shekhinah medaberet tokh gronah*, it was as if I were hearing the Divine Presence.

I asked her what it was that the centre did for the young addicts that helped them change their lives. She replied: this is the first place they've been to that offers them unconditional love. Then she said: We are the first people they've met who care enough about them to say No.

When I heard those two sentences, I realised that is what God does for us this time of the year. We are sin addicts. We do things we know we shouldn't, whether it's taking drugs, or taking liberties, or not respecting others, or blaming someone else when we should be blaming ourselves. Whatever.

We could carry on like this forever, harming others but most of all harming ourselves, were it not for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur calling us to account. That's when, if we open our hearts, we encounter God offering us unconditional love, but caring about us enough to say, No.

LOOKING AT MYSELF IN THE MIRROR

Sent on 5th Elul / 5th September

I've been asked the following question: How do I look at myself in the mirror and change what I see looking back at me? How do I initiate the process of self-reflection and *cheshbon hanefesh*? How do I start to improve the three core relationships: with God, with other people, and with myself?

Well, first I think you have to begin with your relationship with God. That has to be honest and that has to be the one that begins the process. And it begins by asking God, please help me to help You. "*Hashem tzefotai tiftach ufi yagid tehilatecha.*" "Open my lips and my mouth will declare Your praise." God, help me to be the person You feel I ought to be and to do the thing You think I ought to do.

I think the process of change when you throw yourself on God becomes really, really powerful because it takes you beyond yourself and allows you to become bigger than you would've been otherwise. Now, don't expect an answer all at once. You have to be patient. Once you've made that request maybe an answer will come in the middle of the night, maybe it will come tomorrow morning, maybe you won't really hear it at all you'll just sense it somehow. But the first thing to do is to begin with God and say: Please God, help me to help You, to be Your agent, Your ambassador in the world.

From there you move to number two, to other people. And here the key question you have to ask yourself again with total honesty is: What would God want me to do in this situation right now? And that depends on the situation and it depends on the person. If you see somebody lonely then you have to give them company. If

you see them low than you have to lift them. If they're depressed, somehow or other, you have to lift that depression. If they're upset, you may need to make an apology. If they are struggling, they may need your encouragement. But always the question is, and depersonalise this: What would God want me to do in this situation right now? And then you being to be objective about things and then you begin to be able to change your relationship with other people and really make a difference to their lives.

Finally, the self, how do I change my relationship with myself? Speaking personally, the best thing I find is to take a long walk and then ask myself in the course of the walk: Is there something that I am doing wrong? A long walk is probably the best way of doing that because somehow the ideas will flit through your brain and something will lodge there and then you'll probably know the big change you need to make in your life. For me it's a long walk. For others it may be a good sleep. I don't know, but whatever works for you.

So, number one, begin with God. Please God, help me to help you. Number two, use that objectivity by saying, God, what would you like me to do in this situation and that will help you change your relationship with other people. And finally, changing yourself. To repeat, a long walk and ask, 'What am I doing wrong?'. Because there's something each of us is doing wrong. And put it right, and that will initiate a series of good changes in our lives. So, there are my solutions. I hope they help you.

LETTING YOUR BLESSINGS CATCH UP WITH YOU

Sent on 6th Elul / 6th September

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev was looking out over the town square. Everywhere he saw people rushing. He called out to one man, "What are you rushing for?" The man replied, "I'm running to make a living." Levi Yitzhak replied, "What makes you so sure that your livelihood is in front of you so that you have to rush to catch it up. What if it's behind you? Maybe you should stop and let it catch up with you."

True then, it's become more so in our time. Ours was supposed to be the age of leisure. Yet many people work harder than ever. One parent at work has become, in many cases, two. Too many people I know feel endlessly pressurised, trying to juggle home and work, family and career, ambition and recreation. We have to run to stand still. Sometimes we're so busy making a living that we don't have time to live. When do we stop to let our blessings catch up with us?

Which is why holy times are important. For me, Friday nights around the Shabbat table, with the candles, the wine and the challah are the high point of the week. It's when Jewish husbands sing the song of praise to their wives, taken from the 31st chapter of the Book of Proverbs, "A woman of strength, who can find? Her worth is above rubies." Parents bless their children. Together we share words of Torah about the parsha, the biblical portion, we're going to read in the synagogue the next morning. We sing *zemirot*, the traditional melodies. And for a day the pressures of the outside world disappear. There are no phones or emails, no radio or television, no working or shopping. In ancient times Shabbat was a protest against slavery. Today it's an

antidote to stress, the most effective I know.

I remember a young man who came to see me in a state of high anger. His wife by a civil marriage was converting to Judaism so that they could have a Jewish home. Our rabbinical court had told him that he too would have to practice a religious life if we were to sanction the marriage. "Why should he need to change?" he wanted to know. He was born Jewish. Surely that was enough. Well, we spoke, and he went away to reflect. Two years later I officiated at their wedding. They radiated happiness.

A few weeks before the wedding, he came to see me. He wanted to thank me, he said. "I know that at the time I was angry. But you were right. I used to be a workaholic. I worked seven days a week. Keeping Shabbat has changed my life. I now have time for my wife and our baby. We have friends. We feel part of a community. One day in seven we have time to celebrate these things, which I never had before. The work still gets done. But now I have time for the things that matter. Thank you."

Rest sets everything else in perspective. When life becomes an endless succession of pressures, we lose the natural rhythms of work and rest, running and relaxing, striving and enjoying the fruits of our striving. We move so fast that we miss the view. We travel so often that we forget where we're going. At regular intervals we need to stop, pause, breathe, cease becoming and just be. It makes a difference. People used to say that food tastes better on Shabbat. I think they meant that it tastes better when you have time to let it linger on the tongue. Happiness is tasted in tranquillity. And that is what Elul is about; taking a moment in the year, as Shabbat does for us in the week, to slow down, appreciate the view,

and realise that our blessings are right there behind us, waiting for us to rest so that they can catch us up.

LEDOVID HASHEM ORI VEYISHI

Sent on 8th Elul / 8th September

From the 1st of Elul through Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and into Sukkot, the custom is to say Psalm 27 *LeDovid Hashem Ori Veyishi*, a psalm of David: “The Lord is my light and my salvation.” And the traditional explanation that's given is that there is a sort of coded reference to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot in the psalm itself. The rabbi said in *Vayikrah Rabbah*, “The Lord is my light on Rosh Hashanah, my salvation on Yom Kippur,” and “*ki yitzpeneini besukko*”: “He will shelter me or hide me in His sukkah” refers to Sukkot.

However, there was a difference of customs. Some people did not say it during Sukkot. Some people only said it up to and including Yom Kippur. And there is, in particular, a disagreement as to whether you say or you don't say it on Shemini Atzeret. Do you stop on Hashana Rabbah or do you say it on Shemini Atzeret and stop then?

This led to an extraordinary case, one of the most remarkable in Anglo-Jewish history, decades ago before I was born. It happened in one synagogue in London that the hazzan on Shemini Atzeret began saying *LeDovid Hashem Ori Veyishi*. The warden said, “Sha!” The chazzan kept going. The warden said, “You don't say *LeDovid Hashem Ori Veyishi* on Shemini Atzeret.” The chazzan said, “You do.” The warden said, “You don't!” The chazzan said, “But I'm the chazzan.” And the warden then said, “But I'm the warden. You're fired.” And he sacked him on the spot.

When Yom Tov was over, the chazzan took his case to an English civil court on grounds of unfair dismissal. The case came before a non-Jewish judge, obviously. And he had to rule whether the chazzan had been dismissed with cause or without cause, which in turn depended on the question, “Do you or don't you say *LeDovid Hashem Ori Veyishi* on Shemini Atzeret?”

How was the judge supposed to know? How is he supposed to rule on something that is in fact an argument in Jewish law? The judge did something absolutely brilliant. He had the psalm read out, in full, in English, in court. And then he turned to the litigants and said, “That psalm is so beautiful that I think it should be said every day.” The chazzan got his job back, and peace and order was restored. It's a lovely story. And of course, if you read the psalm in its entirety, you'll see exactly why it should be said every day. Because no other psalm breathes so beautifully the quiet confidence of faith.

And that perhaps is why we say it at these times of judgement. Listen to how it begins. “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?” And it ends with these words: “Hope in the Lord be strong, and of good courage in hope in the Lord.” And that I think is what it's all about. On these difficult days, in which our lives pass in judgement on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, in which we leave the security of our homes and sit exposed to the elements on Sukkot, Psalm 27 perfectly expresses our faith that God is sheltering us from harm and that nothing can make us afraid.

YEHUDI MENUHIN

Sent on 9th Elul / 9th September

I didn't know the late Yehudi Menuhin, one of the world's greatest violinists, but I had a very interesting phone conversation with him when he had just been made a Lord. I don't know what his relationship was with Judaism. He came, like his cousin Sir Isaiah Berlin, from a distinguished rabbinical family. They were, if I'm not mistaken, both descended from Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liady, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe. And as his name makes clear, his parents wanted to announce to the world in a way that was unmistakable that he was a Jew. The story goes that when his parents came to America, they were about to rent an apartment in New York when their prospective landlady said, not realising who she was speaking to, "And you'll be glad to know that I don't rent to Jews." They walked away in disgust, but Menuhin's mother made a vow that "her unborn baby would have a label proclaiming his race to the world." So, she called him Yehudi, the Jew.

But I guess that he drifted a long way from that faith in the course of his lifetime. So I was surprised when he phoned me up – I was Chief Rabbi at the time – and said that he would like me to draw up for him, in the kind of lettering you find in a Sefer Torah, the words *Chochmah Bina veDaat*, "wisdom, understanding, and knowledge," the initial letters of which spell 'Chabad'. He wanted those words to appear on the coat of arms he was having designed, to which he became entitled as a peer of the realm, in other words as a Lord.

In the end, he changed his mind. But it was clear to me that at that moment he wanted to reaffirm his connection with Chabad, Lubavitch. And I suddenly remembered the last concert I had heard him play. It

was at Banqueting House opposite Horse Guards Parade in London, the last remaining part of the Palace of Whitehall that was the home of Kings and Queens of England from 1530 to 1698, the place where Charles I was executed in 1649.

To my amazement, in that most English of settings, he played, on solo violin, a medley of Chabad *niggunim*, Lubavitch tunes, including my own personal favourite (I played it on the BBC as one of my Desert Island Discs) *Tzama lacha nafshi*. That beautiful line from Psalm 63: "I thirst for You, my whole being longs for You, in a dry and parched land where there is no water."

What was going on in Yehudi Menuhin's mind and soul in those last years of his life I have no idea. But I have the strongest possible feeling that he, like Heinrich Heine and Gustav Mahler and others, heard however distantly the call of the shofar, reminding them of home.

However far we have drifted, there is a voice, the voice of Elul, that says: come home.

FINDING YOUR PURPOSE

Sent on 10th Elul / 10th September

If you want to find your purpose in life, think about the following sentence. "Where what you want to do meets what needs to be done, that is where God wants us to be." So many of us have passions and if you don't have a passion, take time out to discover it. Dream a lot. Think what would be a life you would really live for. Keep your dreams. Joseph dreamt dreams. A Jewish leader is one who dreams dreams and that's what you want to do. But in the meanwhile, there's a world out there and that world has needs for some things and not others, at some times, and not others, and somehow or other, you have to

connect to that world. And that is why I say your purpose in life comes when those two things meet. What you want to do and what needs to be done.

And for each of us it's different, but it's when they come together that you will know your purpose in life. And if you get it wrong, one or two times, don't worry about it. None of us gets it right first time. I did not want to be a rabbi at the beginning of my career. I had an aspiration to be an economist. I had an aspiration to be a lawyer. I had a dream of being an academic. I didn't think of becoming a rabbi until really quite late. I was very conscious that we were short of rabbis. That's what needed to be done. But I never saw that that's what I wanted to do until one of two great rabbis lit that little spark, that flame in me and all of a sudden what I wanted to do became what needed to be done and so I became a rabbi.

So, I didn't get it right until fourth time until quite late in life. So, don't worry if you get it wrong. And maybe it's not one thing throughout the whole of life. People I really admire are people who really live to the full one role and maybe discover, hey, you know, there's something new that needs to be done and maybe I need to shift direction. But you will always know when it's right because you want to do it and it needs to be done.

THREE WAYS TO MORE MEANINGFUL TEFILLOT

Sent on 11th Elul / 11th September

Somebody asked me for three ways to enhance their *tefillah* (prayers). How can you make your experience of prayer deeper and more dynamic? I would say the following.

Number one, find out what is going on in the *tefillah*. What actually is prayer? What

is a particular prayer all about? That really, really is important. Otherwise you're watching a film without knowing the plot, you're listening to music at the opera in a foreign language and you don't understand what's going on. You really need to understand what is going on in this prayer and that is, and excuse the self-advertisement here, that's why I wrote the introductions to the siddur and to the *machzorim* (festival prayer books) because I discovered that actually there are very few places where people explain to you what's going on in prayer.

So, if you've read my introduction, for instance, you will know that there's a very important movement during *shacharit*. The whole of *shacharit* consists of three movements: creation, revelation, redemption. God as He is in the universe. God as He is in the Torah in His commands and His words. And God as He acts in history and asks us to act in history to bring about a world of justice and compassion. I've also explained that that's a little like Jacob's dream of the angels and the ladder. The angels ascending and descending.

There are three movements in prayer. Number one, *pesukei d'zimra* where we start off at ground level and climb the ladder towards heaven. Then beginning with *baruchu* until the end of the *amidah* or the end of *tachanun*, we are standing or sitting in the Divine Presence itself. We're up there in heaven with the angels, in direct contact with God. And finally, after the *amidah*, beginning with *ashrei* and culminating *u'va l'zion* and *aleinu* with redemption. We're coming down the ladder again from heaven to earth. Understand the musical structure or the intellectual structure of prayer and then you'll get a much better sense of what is going on.

Number two, ask yourself a good question. Whatever the question is about the *tefillah*. Why is the first request of ours on a week day *amidah* “*ata chonein l’adam da’at*”? Why is the first thing we ask for knowledge, intellectual virtues? Try and work out what that is saying about Jewish spirituality. Or ask yourself why at the end of every *amidah* do we say “*elokai netzor l’shonee meira*”? We ask God, please help us not talk *lashon harah*, talk badly about other people? Now, why do we say that in our prayers as the conclusion of the *amidah*? Or look at the *aleinu*. Look at the difference between paragraph one and paragraph two. Why is paragraph one so particularistic? Why is paragraph two so universalistic? In other words, go through the *tefillah* and each day if you can find yourself asking, now why do we do that? And search for the answer. You’ll find the answer eventually but that process of asking the question will set in motion a deepening of your experience of prayer.

Finally, number three, be aware that it's not always possible to get the full dramatic emotion of prayer. Certainly not on a weekday and therefore, look on weekday prayer as a little like an orchestral rehearsal. You're not getting the full emotion of the whole thing until Shabbat or until Yom Tov, but nonetheless you're preparing for it and you're making a big difference to prayer and to your understanding of prayer, but don't expect the full emotional drama to be there as it will be on the opening night come Shabbat, come Yom Tov or what have you.

So those are the three suggestions. Understand what is going on in the prayer as a whole. Number two, look for questions that send you searching for a deeper understanding of a particular prayer. And finally, be patient because you're not going to get the full *kavanah* except when you have time to do so and a

larger congregation in which to do so. May your experience with *tefillah* continue to grow and to deepen, and may Hashem answer all your prayers.

A LESSON IN HAPPINESS

Sent on 12th Elul / 12th September

What is happiness? Over the long course of civilisation, it's proved as hard to define as to achieve. Aristotle called it an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.

Bentham defined it as the balance of pleasure over pain. Our culture tends to define it as a new car, an exotic holiday, or the latest phone or gadget. A car bumper sticker in the United States proclaims, “The guy with the most toys when he dies, wins.” The way we define happiness tells us who we are and in what kind of culture we live.

Before Rosh Hashanah, there is a custom to visit departed loved ones and it always reminds me that the greatest lessons in happiness I ever learned came from funerals. As a rabbi I often had to officiate at them. They were distressing moments, and they never got any easier. Nothing wears away the raw edge of grief, and there is little you can say to a family in the shock of bereavement to ease the pain. Yet nothing taught me more about the meaning of a life.

In my address I had to paint a portrait, one that was true to the person who had died, but one that also summed up what he or she meant to the people closest to them. Talking to the relatives before the funeral, I would begin to see the contours of a life, the things a person had done that made a difference. Usually it meant being a good husband or wife, and a caring parent. It meant doing good to others, preferably quietly, unostentatiously, without expectation of recognition or reward. The people who were most mourned were not

the richest or the most famous or the most successful. They were people who enhanced the life of others. They were kind. They were loving. They had a sense of their responsibilities. When they could, they gave to charitable causes. If they couldn't give money, they gave time. They were loyal friends and committed members of communities. They were people you could count on. Shakespeare's Mark Anthony was wrong. The good we do lives after us. For most of us it's the most important thing that does.

A tribute at a funeral was invariably more than the story of a life. It was an evocation of a world of values, the values that made families and communities what they were. I learned more from those occasions than I did from many courses of moral philosophy. This was ethics at the cutting edge. A funeral was more than a family burying its dead. It was an affirmation of life and the values that give it purpose and grant us as much of eternity as we will know on earth.

I learned from those occasions that happiness is the ability to look back on a life and say: I lived for certain values. I acted on them and was willing to make sacrifices for them. I was part of a family, embracing it and being embraced by it in return. I was a good neighbour, ready to help when help was needed. I was part of a community, honouring its traditions, participating in its life, sharing its obligations. It is these things that make up happiness in this uncertain world. Taken together, they make us see what is a risk in our present culture.

No one ever asked me to say of someone that they dressed well, lived extravagantly, took fabulous holidays, drove an expensive car or had a good time. I never heard anyone praised for being too busy at work to find time for their children. Our

ordinary, instinctive sense of happiness is saner and more humane than the story told by the media. It suggests that happiness is not the pursuit of pleasure or the satisfaction of desire. Instead it's inseparable from living well. It is a moral concept, and it's made in those places where morality matters – the family, the congregation, the community - where we're valued not for what we earn, or what we can buy, or the way we cast our vote, but simply for what we are and what we do.

ON PARENTING

Sent on 13th Elul / 13th September

How do you get your children to live your values? How do you get them to grow? Well, I'll tell you a little story. My late father who had come to Britain as a refugee at the age of six, had to leave school at the age of fourteen to help support his family. He sold *schmutters* [fabrics] in London's East End. It's like the lower east side of New York. And he was never tremendously successful at business and he was one of those people who didn't get the opportunities that he might have done in another time, another place.

But one thing I remember, he used to take me to synagogue when I was five years old, and each Shabbat I would come back, and on our walk together to home, I would ask him questions, "Why do we do this? What does that mean?" And he always gave me the same answer, which I never forgot. He used to say to me, "Jonathan, I never had a Jewish education. So, I can't answer your questions. But one day you will have the education I didn't have. And when that happens, you will teach me the answers to those questions."

One of our great commentators, Rabbi Moshe Alshich, asked a very good question. It says in the Shema in Deuteronomy chapter six, "*veshinumtam*

levaneicha”, you shall teach these things carefully to your children. And he asked a very good question. He said, “How can we be sure that we really will teach things to our children? We can try, but it's not within our hands. It's within our children's hands. How do we act so that we know we will succeed?” And he said, “The Bible gives the answer. The Torah gives the answer.” Just two verses earlier, it says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.”

It is what you love, that your children will learn to love and there is no other way to teach your children. It's not what you say to them. It's not even what you do to them. It is the way your life reflects your loves. Those are the things our children will absorb and eventually make their own. Or as the English poet, William Wordsworth wrote in his great poem, *The Prelude*, “What we love, others will love, and we will show them how.”

FLIGHT PLAN

Sent on 15th Elul / 15th September

In one of his books, the late Stephen Covey, spoke about a plane flight. This was in the 1990s and it may have changed since then. But he said that before take-off, the pilots have a flight plan. They know where they are going, and they know what direction to take. But in the course of the flight, all sorts of factors drive the plane off course: wind, rain, turbulence, air traffic, human error and other causes. The result is that for more than 90% of the journey, the plane is not exactly on the prescribed flight path. There are constant slight deviations. Bad weather or congestion may cause major deviations. Yet, with very few exceptions, the plane will arrive at its destination. Why? Because the pilots have a flight plan, because they're getting constant feedback from the instruments,

because they're making constant adjustments. Autopilot systems work very similarly. And so, he suggests, does life.

We may be off course 90% of the time. But will still arrive at our destination if we know exactly where we are going, if we have ways of discovering whether we are off course, and if we are capable of making adjustments.

We don't need to get it right all the time. That's the point. If God thought we needed to get it right all the time he would never have created human beings in the first place. The stories of the Torah are about failure after failure. Which is why God built *teshuvah* into the system. *Teshuvah* is course correction. It's reminding ourselves where we are supposed to be going, checking whether we are actually going in the right direction, and if not, making the appropriate adjustments.

If we listen with the inner ear to the voice of faith, we hear God saying, “I never asked you not to make mistakes. I only asked you to acknowledge they are mistakes. I am here to lift you when you fall. I am here to forgive you when you fail. I am here to tell you I believe in you. You can do great things. Just believe in my belief in you.”

LISTENING

Sent on 16th Elul / 16th September

A religious woman was being interviewed once about her faith, and in the course of the conversation the interviewer asked her what she said to God when she prayed. “I don't say anything,” she replied. “I just listen.” “And when you listen,” said the interviewer, “what does God say?” “He doesn't say anything,” she replied. “He just listens.” And before the bewildered journalists could say anything more, she

added, "And if you don't understand that, I can't explain it to you.

Judaism is a very noisy religion. We pray loudly together. When we sit and study, we do so in pairs or groups. We debate, gesticulate, pound the table as if the fate of the world depended on the outcome of a disagreement between two rabbis from the 2nd or the 12th centuries. We argue with a passion going to any *Bet Midrash* and you'll hear an inspiring buzz of students immersing themselves in the words of terror the divine speech heard of Mount Sinai on which according to Jewish tradition has echoed ever since.

Years ago, in a television series on the world's great faiths, the presenter turned his attention to Judaism. Among those he interviewed was the Holocaust survivor and writer, the late Elie Wiesel. "Professor Wiesel," he said obviously taken aback by this impression of our faith, "Judaism seems to be a very talkative sort of faith. Tell me, are there any silences in Judaism?" "Judaism is full of silences," replied Wiesel. "It's just we don't talk about them."

Our faith is about the noise, but it's also about silence. The silence beneath speech. There's a very fine passage in Psalms 19: "*Hashamayim misaprim kavod k'el...*" "The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech. Night after night they communicate knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard."

In other words, undergirding all human speech is that sense of something more deeply interfused which is the song of creation to its creator. Beneath the noise there is the music, but to hear it we need to create a silence in the soul. We have to

learn to listen and listening is an art. One of the greatest there is.

In fact, we can define it more precisely. Almost 100 years ago, the young anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski, after fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders of New Guinea reflected on the role of speech in societies primitive and modern. He came to a remarkable conclusion, born out by recent psycholinguistics. Most conversation isn't what we assume it to be, the exchange of information, instead talk, in his words, serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship.

Speech joins. It creates relationship. It involves an almost tangible sense of the presence of an 'other'. We call communication "staying in touch" as if it were a kind of embrace, which actually it is. Malinowski called this "phatic communion", meaning the connection formed when two people talk regardless of what they say, there is a music beneath the words, and we can say what it is. It's the encounter of two persons in which each recognises in the other an answering presence. Someone else is there attending to us, listening, responding to our being, confirming our existence. Speech is intimately related to the social, to our need to belong to something larger than the self.

During Elul, Rosh Hashanah and the *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah*, the Ten Days of Repentance, we spend a lot of time in shul, reaching out to God in conversation, as it were, about who we are as individuals and what kind of life we wish to lead.

Prayer is the act of listening to God listening to us. That is phatic communion when our soul reaches out to the soul of the universe, to God Himself. Yes, there are words, many of them. There's a text, a

liturgy, a *machzor*, a proper order of prayer, the libretto constructed by generation after generation of men and women of faith as they search for the words that would best express their collective thanks to heaven and their hopes for heaven's grace. But there's also a listening beyond words, a silence that gives meaning to speech. In that silence we know and are known by God, so we've over the coming weeks, you sometimes find the davening too complex or too long. Remember that prayer said in silence can be just as powerful as those said out loud, and in that silence we listen to God listening to us.

DOUBT

Sent on 17th Elul / 17th September

The place of doubt in Judaism is very interesting because most people define faith as certainty. I define faith as the courage to live with uncertainty. We don't for a moment believe that the existence of God is so obvious and overwhelming that you've got to be crazy not to believe in God, and this is dramatised in the early chapters of the Book of Exodus. There's Pharaoh who doesn't believe in God; and God sends plague after plague, sign after sign, and he still doesn't believe in God. I love the mediaeval interpretation, that phrase that "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." Most people say that means God took away Pharaoh's free will, but one commentator says, "No, God had to keep giving Pharaoh free will. He strengthened his heart." Because otherwise God would be on him like a ton of bricks and he'd have no place to doubt, and God wanted Pharaoh to be free to doubt His existence, so He strengthened his heart.

The truth is, it's pretty obvious, that you can look at the world and find it meaningless; you can look at the world and find it meaningful. If you're looking for a

life without doubt, without risk, and without uncertainty, stop living because you cannot really live without taking risks. In fact, the Bible makes it pretty clear that God took a massive risk when He created humanity, and that risk didn't play out terribly well because by Genesis chapter six God regrets that He ever created man in the first place, and it grieved Him, to His very heart, a key sentence for me.

One of the most beautiful in the whole of Judaism occurs early in the Book of Jeremiah. We say is on Rosh Hashanah, "*zacharti lach chesed neuraich*," I remember the kindness of your youth, the love of your betrothal. "*leich teich acharei bamidbar be'erez lo zerua'ah*," how you were willing to follow me into an unknown, unsewn land. Jeremiah is saying God loves the Jewish people because they had the courage to take the risk to go into a place they've never seen before, with no map and no roads, just the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. Judaism means the courage to take a risk.

The whole of life is facing the unknown; because even though we can look up to the heaven and see a hundred billion galaxies, each with a hundred billion stars, and when you can look within us at the human genome where there's 3.1 billion letters of genetic code, we can know everything, but there is one thing we will never know: what tomorrow will bring. We face an unknown, an unknowable, future; that means that every single course of action we take, every commitment, has its underside of doubt. It's the ability to acknowledge that doubt, and yet say, "Nonetheless, I will take a risk." That is what faith is: not the absence of doubt, but the ability to recognise doubt, live with it, and still take the risk of commitment.

RECONNECTING TO JUDAISM

Sent on 18th Elul / 18th September

How do I make that first step towards reconnecting myself to Judaism or my faith or my God? How do I take that one step that will help me get ready for Elul and the Holy Days to come? If you want to change one thing, what do you do? Where do you start?

Well, I think the answer to that question depends on what you personally find most emotionally powerful. Let me tell you what I find, that for me the most powerful religious experience comes from music. I've often said that words are the language of the mind, but music is the language of the soul. And for me, music opens me up as nothing else can, and that's whether it's the music of *Kol Nidre*, or the *kaddish* of the *Yamim Noraim*, or if you know a particular moving tune for *Avinu Malkeinu*, any of the real Jewish sounds that resonate with you.

In 1968, I spent Rosh Hashanah as a young sophomore student in 770 Eastern Parkway, where I heard the Lubavitch Rebbe blow *shofar*. After that, we went back to a neighbour, a Chabad chassid who lived nearby for lunch and there was another guest, and as we were waiting for our host to finish his *davening* he told me his story. He had been very far from Judaism. He was a composer of pop music. I had heard some of his compositions because there had been big hits, but he'd given up Judaism for many years. And one day he was driving in the Midwest in America, and suddenly the thought occurred to him that it must be coming close to Rosh Hashanah, which he hadn't observed for several years. And at that moment he said, they came into my mind a song that I learned at *cheder* when I was five or six years old. And as that song came into his mind, he stopped the car, he

turned it around and headed straight to New York, straight to Brooklyn, straight to the home of Chabad. And that he said is why I'm here. That was his *teshuvah*. That was his coming home.

Now what was it that turned it around for him? Was it the music? Was it memories of childhood? Was it the realisation of how far he had drifted and how lost he was? It was probably all three, but that is the power of music to open our soul to the light and the love of God.

THE CRY

Sent on 19th Elul / 19th September

There's an old and totally apocryphal story about the nineteenth century French Jewish aristocrat Baron de Rothschild, whose wife was in her bedroom with a nurse, in the last stages of delivery while he was sitting downstairs playing a game of cards with his friends.

Suddenly they heard her cry, "Mon Dieu, Mon Dieu." "Baron," said his friends, "go up to your wife. She needs you." "Not yet." said the baron and continued playing cards. Five minutes later they heard a cry, "My God, My God." "Go up," said the Baron's friends. "Not yet," said the Baron and returned to his cards. Finally, they heard his wife cry, "*Gevalt!*" The Baron immediately rose and ran upstairs, saying, "Now is the time."

The story is, of course, about how Jews in the nineteenth century had to hide their identities and become more French than the French, more English than the English, and yet remained Jewish in their hearts. The Jewish mind spoke French, but the Jewish soul still spoke Yiddish. But there's another and simpler message, which is that when we cry from the heart, someone listens. That's the message of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah.

We are a hyper-verbal people. We talk, we argue, we pontificate, we deliver witty repartee and clever put downs. Jews may not always be great listeners, but we are among the world's great talkers. Accuse us of anything and we'll come up with a dozen reasons why we're right and you are wrong.

But there comes a moment when we summon the courage to be honest with ourselves. And if we really are honest with ourselves, then we know in our heart that we're not perfect, we don't always get it right, not as individuals and not as a people.

That's the moment when all we can say is *gevalt*. All we can do is cry out. That's what the *shofar* is. The sound of our tears. *Shevarim*, three sighs. *Teruah*, a series of sobs. And surrounding them the *tekiah*, the call without words. The sound of a heart breaking. No more excuses. No more rationalisations and justifications. *Ribbono shel olam*, forgive us.

Truth is, these are the most important moments in life. We can carry on for years deceiving ourselves, blaming others for what goes wrong. We are our own infallible counsel for the defence. But there has to be a time when we allow ourselves simply to weep for the things we know we could have handled better. That is what the *shofar* is: the cry that starts when words end.

That's when God reaches out to us, as parent to child, and holds us close while we weep together, then He comforts us and gives us the strength to begin again. There's nothing closer to God than a broken heart and nothing stronger than a heart that's been healed by God's forgiveness.

FIVE STAGES OF FORGIVENESS

Sent on 20th Elul / 20th September

Someone's asked me about forgiveness. These are important days: Elul and the *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah* are important days for forgiveness. Somebody asked me, "How do you actually forgive? How do you let go of the hurt and the anger?" Well, here is the five-stage process of letting go of the hurt and the anger.

Stage one is the cognitive thing. That is, you ask yourself, "Did that person really mean it? Did they really understand how offensive it was to me or how much it harmed or hurt me? Was it really directed at me personally, or is that individual like that to everyone?" Do those Cognitive Behavioural Therapy-type exercises and you will begin to see things in a much better and broader perspective. That's dealing with the cognitive element.

Stage two, the next stage, is the hurt and the anger themselves, because they are emotions and emotions are not fully under the control of our cognitive bit of the brain. You have to do the things that heal negative emotions. Such as, get a good night's sleep. Even better, do aerobic exercise. That actually promotes the endorphins that get rid of the negative emotions, and they are very, very effective. That's what I personally do. And then, of course, you let time do its work of healing.

Stage three. A strategy which is high-risk but it may just work, which is to directly confront the individual concerned and say to them, "Did you understand how much you hurt me by what you did?" Now, that is the Jewish way. That is the way of "*hoche'yach tochiach et amitecha*", of remonstrating with your neighbour who's hurt you. For the laws of that, look up Rambam *Hilchot De'ot*, chapter six, the

second half of that chapter. So, confront directly.

Stage four, and this is a higher-risk strategy, which is, if need be, show anger. Let the other person know how much they hurt you. The Rambam tells us we're not allowed to feel anger. Well, that was the Rambam, he set a very high standard. But, he says, we are allowed to show anger if we think that that will be effective in helping the other person to correct themselves. It may be important to let the other person know just how much they wronged you by being brusque with them or letting them know that you are angry with them. That's stage four.

And stage five: at the end of it all, you have to ask yourself, "Do I really want to let somebody else control my emotional life?" And that's when you let go of the hurt and the anger, because in the end it's hurting you. It's not hurting the person who hurt you. Therefore, in the end, you really do have to let it go, and get on with the rest of your life.

So, it's a five-stage process: first cognitive, then emotional, then direct conversation with the person who hurts you, then showing them anger if need be, and finally, letting go because actually you are suffering, and you are letting somebody else continue to make you suffer. I hope it works for you. Forgive, however hard it is, because that's what God does for us.

**PRE-SELICHOT KEYNOTE
ADDRESS**

Sent on 22nd Elul / 22nd September

There is no transcript available for this but a recording of this keynote address is available to watch at www.RabbiSacks.org.

KEL MELECH YOSHEV

Sent on 23rd Elul / 23rd September

Someone asked whether I could explain some of the *Selichot*, to give it a little thickness and add texture to the *Selichot* prayers that we're about to begin to say. What I'm going to do, actually, is just talk about one. And that is the most dramatic of them all, one that plays an enormous part in all of the *Selichot* and indeed rises to a kind of crescendo. At *Neilah*, at the end of Yom Kippur, when we say this prayer, depending on your *nusach* but quite possibly seven times. And that is the prayer that begins "*Kel melech yoshev*" and culminates in this great declaration, "*vaya'avor Hashem al panav vayikra, Hashem, Hashem, kel rachum v'achanun*", "The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy". God is a God of mercy and compassion and forgiveness, and so on.

And what is really essential is to understand where this prayer comes from. It comes from the two most traumatic moments in the Torah, the two biggest sins of the Israelites in the wilderness years. One in the book of Exodus, the episode of the Golden Calf, the other one in the book of Numbers, *Sefer Bamidbar*, which is the Sin of the Spies.

Now, on the first occasion, while Moses is up the mountain receiving the Torah and God tells him that the people have made a Golden Calf, Moses prays for the people's forgiveness because God has made it clear that He wants nothing more to do with them. That's the end of his relationship with the people of Israel. He wants to begin again with Moses. Moses pleads for forgiveness for the people. He does so at the time, before he goes down the mountain. He does it a second time after he's gone down the mountain and smashed the Calf and brought the camp back to

order. And he does it again when he goes up to receive a new set of tablets.

It is on that third occasion, when he asked to see God, "Show me your ways. Teach me Your ways.", that God passes before him "*vaya'avor Hashem al panav*", God passes before Moses, just the two them, God and Moses, are at the top of the mountain, and God declares Himself to be a God of compassion and forgiveness, "*kel rachum v'achanun, erech apayim, v'rav chessed v'emet*" and so on. That is the story so far.

However, it takes on a different texture, a much deeper one, when we come to *Sefer Bamidbar*, to the Book of Numbers, and the sin of the spies. Because again, God wants to disown the people and begin again with Moses, and again Moses pleads for forgiveness. But this time *he* is the one who describes God's attributes of mercy.

And the Rabbis, putting these two stories together, as well as reading certain nuances in the text, say that on the first occasion when God was telling Moses what kind of God He is, He was teaching Moses how to pray. The Talmud puts it very dramatically. God wrapped Himself in a *tallit* as if He were a *shaliach tzibur* and He taught *Moshe Rabbeinu* how to pray. He said, "When Israel sins, let them pray before Me in this manner and I will forgive them." That is the story of *kel melech yoshev* and why it becomes the most important link in all the *Selichot*, rising to this crescendo on *Neilah*, why we stand when we say this, and why, in general, it is so powerful. Because this is not some abstract prayer put together out of some theology. This is a real trace of an extraordinary set of crises in the history of our people, at the beginning of the history of our people.

When finally they discovered that however ungrateful they were, however sinful they were, however backsliding and weak-willed they were, at the end of the day, God defines Himself as *kel rachum v'achanun*, a God of compassion and mercy and forgiveness. And we are placing ourselves there on the mountain, one-to-one with God, pleading for us and our people, and God is looking at us and saying, "I forgive you."

MALKHYIOT

Sent on 24th Elul / 24th September

The *mussaf* of Rosh Hashanah is built around three things: *Malchiyot*, *Zichronot* and *Shofrot*; verses relating to God's Kingship, those relating to memory and those relating to the *shofar*. And those are the three defining themes of Rosh Hashanah. And today, and over the next two days, I will explain what these three terms actually signify.

So, let's begin with *Malchiyot*, the idea of verses relating to God as King. If you listen to the prayers on Rosh Hashanah, indeed throughout the *Yamei Noraim*, throughout the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, you will see that *Melech* or *Hamelech*, ("King") is the key of the prayers. It echoes and chimes again and again and again. And the reason is that essentially Rosh Hashanah is an annual coronation ceremony, an annual proclaiming of God as our King. Because Israel were the people who at Sinai took God as their head of state.

Only one country really comes close to that and that's the United States of America. And its self-conception as one nation under God. And what Rosh Hashanah is, is an annual reminder that God who transcends all earthly powers is our King, our Sovereign, our Supreme Authority.

And I think the most beautiful way of describing it was actually given by Rav Soloveitchik z'l, who told the following story. Although he was not at all Chassidic or Lubavitch, nonetheless in Russia as a young boy, his first teacher, his primary school teacher, was a Chabadnik, a Lubavitcher Chassid. And that teacher asked the class what Rosh Hashanah is, and was not satisfied with any of their answers, and explained to them that the *Tzemach Tzedek* says that Rosh Hashanah is a coronation.

And he turned to the class of these young five- and six-year olds and said, "Whose coronation are we going to celebrate?" The young Soloveitchik, (don't forget the Russian revolution of 1917 hadn't yet happened) thought that the obvious person was Tzar Nicholas. But his teacher laughed and said, "Tzar Nicholas, no, he had his coronation years ago. He doesn't need another one. And besides which, he's not the Supreme King. He's not the real King. No Rosh Hashanah, we are going to celebrate the coronation of God Himself."

And then he said this, "And who do you think is going to place the crown on God's head? He answered, Yunkel the tailor, Berel the shoemaker, Zalman the water carrier, Yossel the painter, David the butcher, they are going to place the crown on God's head." And Rav Soloveitchik said, "Over the years, I've given many sermons and written many discourses on the concept of Rosh Hashanah, but nothing ever made me feel the true depth and power of the day as the words of my childhood teacher."

It's a lovely image. If you want to get a sense of the power of the image, then I suggest you go and have a look at the last coronation we had in Britain, which took place in 1953. And you will see that the person who in this very, very religious

ceremony places the crown on the Queen's head is the Archbishop of Canterbury. And now you'll understand why Rav Soloveitchik was so moved by his childhood teacher who said that every Jew, however common, however simple, places the crown on God's head, because God is *yoshev tehillot yisrael*, lives enthroned in the praises of Israel.

So, you and I, by accepting God as our King, actually perform that coronation and place as it were, the crown on the head of the Almighty. What a lovely idea.

ZIKHRONOT

Sent on 25th Elul / 25th September

Yesterday I spoke about *Malchiyot*, the verses relating to God's kingship. Today, I want to say a word about *Zichronot*, about the verses relating to God's memory. *Zachor*, remember, it's one of the key verbs of Judaism, it occurs 169 times in *Tanach* as a whole. And it's one of Judaism's most important ideas. We don't live in the past, but we live with the past and thus we help to keep the past alive. Those who came before us live on in us as we will live on in those who come after us. And not only do we remember, but above all, God remembers. He remembers the good we do, and also the not so good.

Now, this is an incredibly important idea. Marcel Proust, writing one of the great novels of the 20th century, called it *A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu, In Search of Lost Time*. That's a very powerful idea. It's a fearful idea, the nightmare that life is constantly dissolving into a past that is lost forever.

And the best expression I know of this, is actually taken from a film called *About Schmidt*, in which the central character, played by Jack Nicholson, says towards the end, and it's one of the most poignant

speeches in cinema. He says this, "I know we're all pretty small in the big scheme of things. What in the world is better because of me? I am weak and I am a failure. There's just no getting around it. Soon I'll die. Maybe in 20 years, maybe tomorrow, it doesn't matter. When everyone who knew me dies too, it will be as though I never even existed. What difference has my life made to anyone? None that I can think of. None at all."

That is the nightmare that somehow or other the past is lost. Judaism says no, the past is not lost. It is remembered. God remembers us and those who came before us and He remembers all the promises He made to our ancestors, which He will keep. And on Rosh Hashanah, He reads the Book of Life in which all our deeds are recorded. Rosh Hashanah is in that sense, a festival of memory. We know that God remembers what we have done, which is why we too try to remember and try to put right the wrong we may have done.

SHOFAROT

Sent on 26th Elul / 26th September

The third key word, obviously on Rosh Hashanah is *Shofarot*, the verses relating to the sounding of the *shofar*. What exactly is the *shofar*? Well, its key to the essence of the day. *Tanach* does not call Rosh Hashanah, "Rosh Hashanah". It calls it "Yom Teruah", the day of the sounding of the *shofar* or "Zichron Teruah", a day of remembering the sounding of the *shofar*. *Teruah* is a kind of name for the note rather than the instrument. But we know from another *Teruah*, the *Teruah* sounded on Yom Kippur of the Jubilee year, that that *Teruah* was done using a ram's horn and therefore we apply that to Rosh Hashanah.

But what is the significance of the sounding of the ram's horn on the New

Year? And on this, there are two diametrically opposed traditions. The first one is the view of the *Talmud*, the Babylonian *Talmud*, which says that we blow *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah because God said "*tiku lefanai b'shofar shel ayil kedei she'ezchor lachem akeidat yitzchak ben Avraham, uma'ale ani aleichem keilu ikadetem atzmeichem lefanai*", meaning, "Sound the *shofar* before Me on Rosh Hashanah with the ram's horn so that I can remember for you (in your merit) the binding of Isaac. And I will account you as if you had bound yourself before Me." In other words, it's a reminder of the ram that was caught in the thicket and offered by Abraham instead of Isaac at the *Akeidah*. According to this, the *shofar* represents the sacrifices Jews have made throughout the centuries and generations for Judaism. It's the sound of Jewish tears. It's the sound that begins down here on earth and wends its way up towards heaven.

Maimonides says exactly the opposite. He says that the deep meaning of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is "*uru yeshainim mishenatechem venirdamim hakitzu mitredaimatechem vechapsu bma'aseichem vechizru biteshuvah vezichru bora'achem*." "Wake you sleepers from your sleep and you slumberers from your slumber, examine your deeds, come return in *teshuvah* and remember your Creator." According to Rambam, the *shofar* is God's wake-up call, telling us that life is short and you should live for what is real. Don't waste your time on *bubbemeisers* and *tchatchkes*. Live a life that has meaning. Live a life that adds to the lives of others. It is God's cry to us. It is, in other words, the sound that begins in heaven and makes its way down here on earth.

Now, I love these two ideas. They are so beautiful, because if you put them together, what they say is that as we are calling out to God, we discover that He is

calling out to us with a call that goes too deep for words. That is the sound of the *shofar*, heaven and earth calling one another.

THE FUTURE OF THE PAST
Sent on 27th Elul / 27th September

It's strange, very strange. Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, the Ten Days of Repentance. We reflect on the past year, recall the bad we did and the good we failed to do, apologise, confess and ask for forgiveness.

Yet there's almost none of this on Rosh Hashanah. There is no confession, no *ashamnu bagadnu*, no *al chet*, no reference to the past year, no looking back. One of the few references to the fact that we are embarking on a process of *teshuvah* is the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer reminding us that today our fate is being written: who will live and who will die.

Surely the beginning of the days of repentance should begin with repentance? The answer is one of the deepest truths of Judaism. *To mend the past, first you have to secure the future.*

I learned this from the Holocaust survivors I came to know. They were among the most extraordinary people I've ever met, and I wanted to understand how they were able to survive, knowing what they knew, seeing what they saw.

What I came to realise was that many of them did not speak about those years, even to their spouses or their children, sometimes for as long as forty or fifty years. Only when they had secured the future did they allow themselves to look back at the past. Only when they had built a life did they permit themselves to remember death.

That was when I understood two strange characters in the Torah, Noah and Lot's wife. After the flood, it seems, Noah looked back. Overwhelmed by grief he sought refuge in wine. Before the flood he was the only person in the whole of Tanakh to be called righteous, yet he ended his days drunk and dishevelled. Two of his sons were ashamed to look at him.

Lot's wife disobeyed the angels, turned back to look at the destruction of Sodom and was turned into a pillar of salt. I think the Holocaust survivors knew that if they turned and looked back they too would be reduced to the salt of tears.

Jews survived every tragedy because they looked forward. When Sarah died, Abraham was 137 years old. He had just lost the woman who had shared his life's journey and who had twice saved his life. He might have been paralysed by grief. Yet this is what we read: "Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and weep for her. Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife" (Gen. 23: 2-3): a mere ten words in Hebrew.

We then read how Abraham bought the first plot of land in Israel and arranged for a wife for his son. Long before, God had promised him children and a land. By the time Sarah died he owned no land and had one unmarried child. Instead of complaining to God that He had not fulfilled his promises, he understood that he had to take the first step. First, he had to build the future. That was how he honoured the past.

And that's what we do on Rosh Hashanah. The Torah readings are about the miraculous birth of two children, Isaac to Sarah and Samuel to Hannah, because children are our deepest investment in the future. We proclaim God's sovereignty as if the day is a coronation, the beginning of a

new era. Then, having committed ourselves to the coming year, on the intervening days and Yom Kippur we can turn and apologise for last year. Paradoxically in Judaism the future comes before the past.

This one insight could transform the world. After the Holocaust, Jews didn't sit paralysed by grief. They built the future, above all the land and state of Israel. If other nations really cared about the future instead of trying to avenge the wrongs of the past, we would have peace in some of the world's worst conflict zones.

And so it is with us. First, we have to focus on building a better future. Then and only then we can redeem the past.

**TEN SHORT IDEAS FOR ROSH
HASHANAH AND YOM KIPPUR**

*Sent on 29th Elul / 29th September
Erev Rosh Hashanah*

As we approach Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the start of the Jewish year, here are ten short ideas which might help you focus your davening and ensure you have a meaningful and transformative experience.

Number one. Life is short. However much life expectancy has risen, we will not, in one lifetime, be able to achieve everything we might wish to achieve. This life is all we have. So the question is: How shall we use it well?

Number two. Life itself, every breath we take, is the gift of God. Life is not something we may take for granted. If we do, we will fail to celebrate it. Yes, we believe in life after death, but it is in life before death that we truly find human greatness.

Number three. We are free. Judaism is the religion of the free human being freely responding to the God of freedom. We are not in the grip of sin. The very fact that we can do *teshuvah*, that we can act differently tomorrow than we did yesterday, tells us we are free.

Number four. Life is meaningful. We are not mere accidents of matter, generated by a universe that came into being for no reason and will one day, for no reason, cease to be. We are here because there is something we must do; to be God's partners in the work of creation, bringing the world that is closer to the world that ought to be.

Number five. Life is not easy. Judaism does not see the world through rose-tinted lenses. The world we live in is not the world as it ought to be. That is why, despite every temptation, Judaism has never been able to say the messianic age has come, even though we await it daily.

Number six. Life may be hard, but it can still be sweet. Jews have never needed wealth to be rich, or power to be strong. To be a Jew is to live for the simple things: love, family, community. Life is sweet when touched by the Divine.

Number seven. Our life is the single greatest work of art we will ever make. On the *Yamim Noraim*, we step back from our life like an artist stepping back from their canvas, seeing what needs changing for the painting to be complete.

Number eight. We are what we are because of those who came before us. We are each a letter in God's book of life. We do not start with nothing. We have inherited wealth, not material but spiritual. We are heirs to our ancestors' greatness.

Number nine. We are heirs to another kind of greatness: to Torah and the Jewish way of life. Judaism asks great things of us and by doing so makes us great. We walk as tall as the ideals for which we live, and though we may fall short time and again, the *Yamim Noraim* allow us to begin anew.

And number ten. The sound of heartfelt prayer, together with the piercing sound of the *shofar*, tell us that that is all life is - a mere breath - yet breath is nothing less than the spirit of God within us. We are dust of the earth but within us is the breath of God.

So, if you can remember any of these ideas, or even just one, I hope it will help you to have an even more meaningful experience over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Together with Elaine, I wish you and your families a *ketiva v'chatima tova*. May we, and all of *Am Yisrael*, be written in God's Book of Life for a year of blessing, fulfilment and peace. *Shana tova u'metukah* to you all.

TZOM GEDALIAH

Sent on 3rd Tishrei / 2nd October

What is *Tzom Gedaliah* and does it have any connection with Rosh Hashanah and the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, the 10 Days of Repentance?

Well, *Tzom Gedaliah*, as I am sure you know, is the fast that commemorates the assassination of Gedaliah, the Babylonian-appointed governor of the Jews of Judea, of Israel who remained after the Babylonian exile. Gedaliah was a good man in difficult circumstances. The people were traumatised by the defeat, actually the two-fold defeat by the Babylonians and the conquest of Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem. And Gedaliah, nonetheless, gave them morale and tell them to come

back to plant their fields, to rebuild the Jewish *yishuv* and to have hope for the future. But sadly some Jewish zealots, some ten of them or so, assassinated him about five years after the conquest. And that really did plunge the tiny Jewish remaining *yishuv* in Judea into depression and almost into non-existence.

Now, is there any connection between that and Rosh Hashanah? I think there probably is actually because Rosh Hashanah, as I mentioned, is a universal, first of all, rather than particular one. It isn't a remembrance of anything in specifically *Jewish* history, it is *hayom harat olam*. It's the anniversary of creation. It's a festival of the universe and of all humanity. And it seems to me that there has been a persistent tendency of Jews throughout history to not see clearly the relationship between us in our Jewish particularity and us in our human universality. We haven't really fully understood our relationship with the world.

The people who did understand this were intensely religious people. People like the prophet Jeremiah or like Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. And what is very pronounced about both of them is that although they were morally and spiritually extremists, politically they were moderates. Jeremiah told the Jews. "Don't take on Babylon." Yochanan ben Zakkai told the Jews, "Don't take on Rome." And they weren't listened to, and the zealots were. And the end result was the destruction of the Temple under the Babylonians, the destruction of the Second Temple under the Romans, and then the devastating defeat some decades later of Jews in Israel as a result of the suppression of the Bar Kochba rebellion.

Jews did not realise that our strength is moral and spiritual. It isn't military. It isn't demographic. We're not capable of taking

on the world in material terms, we are capable of taking on the world in *spiritual* terms. And therefore, it seems to me that at this time of the year, we have to reflect on the relationship between us, this tiny people that we are, and this vast sea of humanity and understand that we have much to give it. But we should also understand that our strength is not demographic or economic. Our strength is simply moral and spiritual. And that is what Gedaliah understood and what his enemies did not.

So, as we fast, remember that truth: that spiritually we are strong, but for the rest, we take our part with humanity as a whole. And we work for moderation, not for extremism.

TESHUVAH, TEFILLAH, TZEDAKAH

Sent on 4th Tishrei / 3rd October

“*U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah, ma'avirin et roah' hazezerah*”: Penitence, prayer, and charity avert the evil decree or better still, avert the evil of the decree. Why these three things? Why penitence, prayer and charity? I think what we're really saying is that these are the three core elements of the spiritual and moral life. *Teshuvah* is about my relationship with myself. *Tefillah*, prayer, is about my relationship with God, and *Tzedakah*, giving charity or fighting for justice, is about our relationship with other people. And what we're really saying is that we can transform our fate by these three because these three define who we are. *Teshuvah* means constantly striving to climb to a higher rung of spirituality. If I can give a banal physical analogy, the National Health Service in the UK has a programme to help people run, especially people who haven't been fit at all, and it's called 'Couch to 5K' in nine weeks.

That means from being completely unfit to being able to run for five kilometres in a phase graduated way for nine weeks. *Teshuvah* is about the same thing, only in spiritual terms. It's about learning to exercise the spiritual muscles that we haven't used in a long time. It is about saying, tomorrow I can be better than I am today. That's *Teshuvah*.

Tefillah, prayer, our relationship with God, well, prayer can be understood in two completely different ways. In prayer, we could either be asking God to do something for us or asking God to give us the strength to do something for Him. And I personally prefer the second sense because that, for me, is what prayer is. It's about inhaling strength. It's about opening ourselves up to what one English writer called the eternal power, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness. Prayer is opening the soul to the energies of God and that gives us the strength to do what God wants and perhaps needs us to do.

And finally, *Tzedakah*, which is charity or in general, good works to other people. That is about becoming giving people, about moving from asking what does the world give us to asking what do we give the world? And that is a really powerful principle. To go through life giving help to the people who need help and thereby discovering that when you lift others, in truth you lift yourself.

Now these are three powerful movements of the soul and they all interact with one another. So that by improving our relationships with other people, we improve our relationship with God, and we then improve our relationship with our self, and the end result is a virtuous circle. We become better than we were. And that is why in our prayers we ask for God to help us do those three things, to change

our lives, and thereby be written in the Book of Life.

AVINU MALKEINU

Sent on 5th Tishrei / 4th October

Avinu Malkeinu, that great prayer we say on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the days between, is based on a much shorter prayer attributed to Rabbi Akiva, the great teacher of the first and second century. And in its repeated two-word introduction is a deep and beautiful idea that I think is best explained by a story.

Once a great naval ship sailed into the port. On the hillside overlooking the sea, a crowd had gathered to watch it enter. Among them was a small child who waved to the ship. An adult asked the child to whom he was waving. The child replied, "I'm waving to the captain of the ship." The man said, "Do you think the captain of such a great ship would notice a small child like you?" "I'm sure of it," said the child. "Why?" said the adult. "You see," said the child, "the captain of the ship is my father."

On the one hand, God is *Malkeinu*, our King, and we are his servants. But on the other he is *Avinu*, our Father and we are His children. When God told Moses to lead the Israelites to freedom, He told him to say to Pharaoh, "My child, My firstborn, Israel." When Moses commanded the Israelites not to lacerate themselves or divide themselves into factions, He said, "You are the children of the Lord, our God."

So we experience God in two ways, in awe and in love. In awe because He's our Sovereign, the Supreme power of the universe, but also in love because He brought us into being. He is to us as a parent is to us.

Between a servant and a king, there can be estrangement. A king can send a servant into exile, but between a father or a mother and a child, there can be no estrangement. However far removed they are from one another, the bond between parent and child still holds.

The beauty of Rabbi Akiva's prayer is the way he orders the words *Avinu Malkeinu*. God is our King and a king rules by justice, but before God is a King, He is a parent. A parent loves. A parent lets love override strict justice. A parent forgives. In the words, "Our Father, our King," Rabbi Akiva was saying, "Yes, You are our King, but remember that You are also our Parent therefore that we have sinned, forgive us."

If our words are honest and penetrate to our heart, they penetrate to God's heart also, and God forgives because a parent can't forsake his or her child. Whatever wrong they may have done, God's love for us is like that, but deeper. "Though my father and mother might abandoned me," says David in Psalm 27, "God will bring me close." *Avinu Malkeinu*, our Father, our King.

VIDUI

Sent on 6th Tishrei / 5th October

What is the meaning and the source of *Vidui*, (confession), the thing we do on *selichot* and above all on Yom Kippur, the prayer that begins "*Ashamnu, bagdnu, gazalnu*", that we say, beating our heart and confessing collectively our sins?

The answer is, it goes all the way back to the Temple, to the sacrifices and specifically to the sin offering in which the sinner, upon bringing the offering, confessed their sin and said, very simply, "*Chatati aviti pashati*", "I have done wrong, I have sinned", and then specifies the sin. And though the Temple hasn't

existed for over 2000 years, and though we no longer have a sin offering, *Vidui*, the act of confession still exists, still has its original power. And according to Maimonides it is the biblical core of the *mitzvah* of *teshuvah* itself.

What does *Vidui* actually mean? It means standing in court, and pleading guilty, and then throwing yourself on the mercy of the court, which you can do because you know that God is indeed merciful, “*kel rachum vechanun*”, that God forgives, “*venislach lechol adat Bnei Yisrael*”, that Judaism itself is a culture of forgiveness.

Now imagine an unforgiving culture. The truth is that is the culture that exists throughout most of the contemporary West. The culture of viral videos and hashtags and so on, some of which is very important and valuable but not all of it. And we have today an unforgiving culture. Now, in an unforgiving culture, what do you do? You do anything possible to avoid confession. You hope no-one finds out what you've done. If they do, then you bluff it out. You deny it for as long as you can.

But in a culture of forgiveness, which is Judaism, especially on the days of *selichot* and on Yom Kippur, you can do the opposite. You can be honest. You can express remorse. You can acknowledge that you are not proud of everything you did. You can commit yourself not to repeating that sin in future.

And the end result is you can grow. And that is so much better than the alternative. Honesty and moral growth are a lot better than bluff and denial and being haunted by guilt. So, confession frees us to be honest about ourselves, to identify our failings, and then, morally, to grow. It really is an act of purification and of moral growth.

KOL NIDRE

Sent on 7th Tishrei / 6th October

What exactly is *Kol Nidre* and what gives it its unique power? This is actually a very puzzling question because if you look at *Kol Nidre* itself, you will see, first of all, it's not even a prayer. It's actually a legal formula for the annulment of vows.

Secondly, the annulment of vows, *Hatarat Nedarim*, is something that many people have already done on the morning of erev Rosh Hashanah. So, we don't need to do it a second time. What is more, many of the *Rishonim* doubted that you could annul vows and that collective wholesale manner, doing it once for the whole shul. Many people doubted that that was a valid legal procedure whatsoever.

So here, you have a legal formula that is not a prayer and is of questionable validity, and yet nonetheless, there's an extraordinary intensity about it. Why so?

Well, some people say it's simply to do with the music. And certainly, the music is indeed very powerful.

Some people say that it has to do with the Middle Ages when, in places like Spain, many Jews lived secretly as Jews, while outwardly they were living as Christians. Or maybe it's a reference to Jews who were excommunicated from the community. One way or another, Jews who had not been inside the synagogue for the whole year would nonetheless come on *Kol Nidre* night, and there is a formula that we say before *Kol Nidre*, “*beyeshiva shel mala u'viyeshiva shel mata*”, “In the court of heaven and the court on earth”, “*anu materim lehitpalel im ha'ava'ryanim*”, “we give permission to pray with the transgressors.” And that was allowing these people who had been excommunicated or excluded from the community, shut out in

other words, to come back and to re-join the Jewish community in prayer. Maybe that gave it its power.

If you look at my commentary to the *machzor*, you will see that I put forward a completely different theory, which is that *Kol Nidre* is actually going back to the most intense drama of confession and forgiveness in all of Jewish history. When Moses pleaded to God to forgive the Jewish people after they had made the Golden Calf. And we read the words “*vayichal Moshe*”, “Moses besought God”, but “*lachool*” can also mean ‘to nullify’. And the Sages said that Moses said to God, even though you have vowed to punish those who worship other gods, and you are thus compelled by your vow to punish the Israelites, nonetheless God, you have given us the power to annul vows, “*vayichal Moshe*”, “and Moses said”, God, I am using that power to annul your vow. You are now free to forgive the Israelites for their sin.”

That is a rabbinic reading, dramatic in itself, of the most dramatic encounter in prayer in the whole of Jewish history. That is what gives *Kol Nidre* its power. It is taking us back to Moses on Mount Sinai, pleading with God to forgive His people. And so, on *Kol Nidre* night, that is what the chazzan does; he is in place of Moses and we are praying for forgiveness.

YOM KIPPUR MUSSAF

Sent on 8th Tishrei / 7th October

Yom Kippur is unique in the extent to which, especially during *mussaf*, we retell and relive the ceremony as it took place in the Temple in Jerusalem, with the High Priest, conducting the most elaborate ritual of the year, when he atoned for the whole of Israel.

Every prayer we say throughout the year is “*zecher l’mikdash*”, is in some sense a

memory of the sacrifices that took place in the Temple. But on Yom Kippur much, much more than that, we try to imagine ourselves actually there. We describe the service of the High Priest in detail during the *Chazarat Hashatz*, the readers’ repetition of *mussaf*. We fall on our faces as the crowd did in the Temple when they heard the *sheim hameforash*, the name that only he could pronounce. When they heard that coming from his mouth, the holiest name of God, they fell on their faces and we, four times fall on our faces. And the reason why we say “*Baruch sheim kavod malchuto*” out loud during *Shema*, only on this day of the year. There are many Midrashic explanations, but the historical explanation is that’s what happened in the Temple. They didn’t say “*amen*” in the Temple; they responded to the Priests by saying “*Baruch sheim kavod malchuto*”. That’s why we say it silently during the rest of the year because the Temple no longer stands but on Yom Kippur we act as if the Temple still stood.

And the question is why? And the answer lies in the nature of Yom Kippur and the service of the *Cohen Gadol*, the High Priest because it was on that day that he atoned for all Israel. For all of us, together, as a unit, as an entity, as a collective, as *am echad*, as a single people. And there is incredible power in that idea.

When the Temple was destroyed, we continued to practice Yom Kippur and instead of the High Priest, that was devolved and democratised to each of us as individuals. So we apologise, we atone, we confess as individuals. But Judaism and the Sages did not want to lose the power of that collective repentance that only happened in the Temple with the High Priest. And that is why we re-enact the High Priest service at the Temple so that we should repent collectively not just individually.

So on Yom Kippur, as congregations and communities around the world, united in sending our prayers to Jerusalem as if the Temple still stood, say to God please accept our prayers as if the High Priest was still officiating in the holy and the Holy of Holies. Accept our repentance as one people, with one heart, one soul and one voice. Hear us together. Forgive us together. And together write us in the Book of Life.

NEILAH

*Sent on 9th Tishrei / 8th October
Erev Yom Kippur*

“Wherever you find God's greatness,” said Rabbi Yohanan, “there you will find His humility.” And wherever you find true humility, there you will find greatness. That is what Yom Kippur is about: finding the courage to let go of the need for self-esteem that fuels our passion for self-justification, our blustering claim that we are in the right when in truth we know we are often in the wrong. Most national literatures, ancient and modern, record a people's triumphs. Jewish literature records our failures, moral and spiritual. No people has been so laceratingly honest in charting its shortcomings. In *Tanakh* there is no one without sin. Believing as we do that even the greatest are merely human, we also know that even the merely human – us – can also be great. And greatness begins in the humility of recognising our failings and faults.

The greatness to which God is calling us, here, now is “not in heaven nor across the sea” but in our hearts, minds and lives, in our homes and families, our work and its interactions, the tenor and texture of our relationships, the way we act and speak and listen and spend our time. The question God asks us at *Neilah* is not, “Are you perfect?” but “Can you grow?”

There are three barriers to growth. One is self-righteousness, the belief that we are already great. A second is false humility, the belief that we can never be great. The third is learned helplessness, the belief that we can't change the world because we can't change ourselves. All three are false. We are not yet great, but we are summoned to greatness, and we can change. We can live lives of moral beauty and spiritual depth. We can open our eyes to the presence of God around us, incline our inner ear to the voice of God within us. We can bring blessings into other people's lives.

And now, in absolute humility, we turn to God, pleading with Him to seal us in the book of life so that we can fulfil the task He has set us, to be His ambassadors to humankind.

This Yom Kippur, may you find the transformative experience lift you to become greater next year than you were last year, to climb the ladder towards heaven, to be a little closer to the person God needs us to be.