

Renewal and Return

The evenings are drawing in. Even as we sense the sharpness of an early Autumn in the morning air, we marvel at the beauty of the leaves turning on the trees, the smell of decay as the dead leaves begin to rot underfoot and the conkers fall. The imprint of the year turning is embedded deep in the memory of our cells.

Before the winter comes, we celebrate the harvest; our Holy Day/Holiday season will come to fruition in Sukkot and Simchat Torah. Even as we enter this period of judgment and introspection, we rejoice at the opportunity for gathering in, and for Return.

And what rejoicing, what gathering in, what Return as so many of us come together on this Rosh HaShanah morning – expressing with your presence your vote of confidence in our community, your hopefulness in our future.

It's no coincidence that, as the year turns, so do we – as a People. The meaning of *Teshuvah*, inadequately translated as Repentance, the activity with which we are occupied for the next ten days culminating in Yom Kippur next Wednesday night/Thursday, is Turning/Returning. At Rosh Hashanah we return to ourselves, return to each other, and return to God.

How are we to understand this process? In 'This is Real and you are totally Unprepared', a guide to the High Holydays, Rabbi Alan Lew z'l points out that the word *Teshuvah* shares the three letters of its root with 'Shabbat' to stop, to rest. When we stop and rest we give ourselves time to be fully present to our joys, as well as to our losses and our pain. To celebrate the harvest of our achievements, acknowledge how far we have come and give ourselves credit for the courage and resilience shown in the face of challenge and adversity.

How much courage and resilience it takes just to maintain equilibrium and balance in this troubled world, to maintain openness, empathy and hope amidst so much disaster, destruction, disappointment and despair. We were never meant to carry the burden of the whole world upon our shoulders. Sometimes, like an astronaut looking down at the spinning globe of our beautiful planet from space, we need to take a step back to look at our lives and look at the world from a wider perspective.

Stopping and resting helps us to recharge our batteries; to draw breath; to be renewed.

This Rosh HaShanah, may the leaders of our community have the opportunity to stop and rest. My goodness, have they worked hard in the past few months: from getting us up and running on Infoodle, BPS's new data system, to starting to sort out the muddle around membership invoices, to appointing a new Administrator and then, when things didn't work out due to unfortunate personal

circumstances, quickly appointing Emily, our new Administrator, who is going to be a wonderful asset to the community; from hauling off bags of rubbish through the bin men strike, to power washing the kitchen floor, to doing an inventory of the kitchen and getting us up to speed on health and safety; from starting to expand the security team, to ensuring our safeguarding policies and practices are sound, to creating a beautiful new garden space outside on the veranda. This and so much more alongside the hundreds of volunteer hours that go on behind the scenes of BPS's regular activities: from Tikkun Olam to Tec and communications; from Minhag, Lay-leaders and Torah readers to Interfaith and Outreach in the wider Birmingham community; from Care Team to Kiddush to Rotas, to preparations for the 90th Anniversary Afternoon Tea. From Learning to Training, to getting together to run the Children's service, to the Choir lifting up our spirits, our hearts and our prayer through this High Holy Day season, to taking one more step on our Jewish journey. I feel like I need to sit down for a cup of tea just hearing the list of a small part of what's going on!

And who are the leaders of our community? The leaders of our community are every single person who has dedicated their time and effort, for an hour, or ten or forty hours in their week or in a month, alongside the members of Council who stepped up at the last AGM to serve the community. I want to thank all the members of Council and every single volunteer who is contributing, in whatever way you can, through giving your time, expertise, or financial resource, to the renewal and flourishing of our community.

Leadership is by example. This Rosh HaShanah I want to say a special Thank You to Joyce Rothschild. Joyce stepped into the breach as Interim Chair at Pesach, and then, at the AGM, stepped up as Chair. Like Moshe Rabeinu, Moses our teacher, she never planned to lead our People. Like Miriam the prophetess, she is taking us forward with timbrel in her hand, leading us together in song and action, inspiring us with her tireless effort, uniting us with a vision of what this great community can be, and doing all this with kindness, sensitivity, skill and good cheer.

I think all our volunteers deserve an opportunity to stop and rest and recharge their batteries! And they certainly deserve our gratitude and appreciation. May we all be renewed through our gathering together in prayer and community this morning, and through the holiness of this day.

We Turn... At the same time, 'arriving', reaching a state of completion, is not a Jewish idea. Rather, cycles of exile and return are the mythic and historic narrative of the Jewish People. Time after time we miss the mark, and are exiled to Babylon, to Rome, to the four scattered corners of the earth.

We recognise that exile is not a physical distance, but a spiritual separation from G-d, from ourselves, from those we love. Returning, we gain the perspective and the strength to choose a new direction, to set our compass for a new orientation

in our lives. To align the choices we make and the lives we create for ourselves with what is truly most important to us.

In 'The Thirteen Petalled Rose', Adin Steinsaltz points out that a further meaning of Teshuvah is Response; an Answer. But the response we expect from G-d is at best an affirmation, an assurance that we are headed in the right direction. This is the path of the Jew – always to be searching, yearning. To accept that the work of fixing and finishing and healing is never done. That acknowledgement of the journey travelled is itself our reward.

Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of the world, and thus carries one of the most universal messages of all the Jewish festivals. We remember that G-d left the work of creation unfinished, inviting us to be co-partners in the task of completing the world, and completing ourselves. We imitate G-d in our capacity for creativity, for change and for boundless possibility.

May each of us, according to our own capacity, take up the invitation to be partners in the continuing creation of this community in the coming year. May we embrace creativity and change to take us forward, creating a vision of boundless possibility for the future of BPS and all of Progressive Judaism in this exciting year of the Liberal and Reform Movements coming together. May we be blessed with bringing such a vision to fruition.

Soon we will hear the blasts of the shofar, which call us to wake up! and to look at our lives with a critical eye. May the blasts of the shofar this year also remind us to stop and to rest; to gather in and to Return. Let us return to our Source in God, and remember that we are creative beings with the capacity for change, renewal and boundless possibility.

Wishing you all a Shana Tova u'metukah!
A healthy, happy and sweet New Year