

YOM KIPPUR AM 5778 – THE STATE OF THE WORLD, THE JEWISH WORLD, AND ISRAEL

Rabbi Jonathan Keren-Black, Leo Baeck Centre for Progressive Judaism

This has been a tough year for the world – and when it is tough for the world it is usually tough for the Jews as well!

On Yom Kippur we have the opportunity, as the day and its various services move on, to reflect on who we've been and how we've been over the year since last we stood here, whether convinced to try to change at least a bit for the better, or simply cynical. We may believe that God, the great judge and arbiter, counsel and witness, is indeed judging us, as we say in the Unetaneh Tokef. We may interpret it to say we are really our best judge, as well as our worst enemy. Or we may think it makes no difference to the world one way or other, for everything is ultimately random and a matter of luck; everyone is out for themselves, the fittest rise to the top, and anyone hurt on the way is purely collateral damage.

Looking at the quite terrifying threats and current stand-off between the leaders of America and North Korea, the latter and ultimately selfish, position comes to mind. As we mark 100 years since the first world war, we are reminded that though some sixteen million people were killed, the so-called war to end all wars did not live up to its name, but left the seeds of the second world war only 21 years later. But, though we know that a fair and negotiated settlement is infinitely preferable to armed combat, it also seems that there are occasions when it becomes almost impossible to achieve, and we may be facing that now, as the world simply can't live in the shadow of a belligerent nuclear-armed rogue state.

So, though today we try to look inward, we also recognise that we don't stand on our own. The words of the Vidui confessions are in the plural – *Al chet shechatanu* – for the sins WE have sinned, *Kaper Lanu* – grant US atonement. *Ki anu amecha, v'atah malkeinu* – for WE are your people, and you are OUR sovereign; *Avinu Malkeinu* - OUR parent, OUR sovereign. *Ashamnu, Bagadnu* – WE have trespassed and been treacherous. We pray *Hayom T'amtzeinu* – *hayom t'varecheinu* - this day strengthen US and bless US. We're all in it together, a part of community, a part of society, and if the 1914-18 war drew in all the *major* countries of the world – even China declared war on Germany and dug trenches for the allies – then today there is no escape for even the smallest nation from globalisation – and even if their regimes try to stop or control their internet access, they won't be able to stop warming temperatures, more powerful tornados and rising sea levels. Five of the Solomon Islands have been lost to rising sea levels and their inhabitants have had to leave. Airstrips on some Torres Strait Islands, technically a part of Queensland, are now under water at high tide, so it is already affecting Australian territory too. Kiribati is having to build artificial islands at enormous expense to preserve itself. With the rapidly increasing incidents and record-breaking extremes of climate events over this past year, and the many thousands of lives lost or dislocated, it seems hardly necessary any more to warn of the speed of change or the potential for disaster. What I will say is that WE – we as individuals, we collectively as influencers or shareholders, our governments, our world, can no longer continue to dig and burn coal, especially, must not open huge new Mega-mines like the reef-busting Adani one in the Galilee basin in Queensland. If I get arrested in the coming

year, it will be for chaining myself to a bulldozer or in some other way trying to stop this disastrous development, because I – and we – have a responsibility to take care of God’s world and protect it for future generations, who will themselves sit here in years to come and, individually and collectively, seek to atone for the sins they have committed, but ask, incredulously, why those before them allowed these sins against God’s creation to continue!

Record-breaking monsoon floods have displaced millions and killed more than 1,000 people in South Asia. We watched helpless as hurricanes developed and millions were evacuated as areas of Texas, Florida and the Caribbean were devastated, affecting friends and family of LBC members living there, and then Puerto Rico. ‘Unfortunately, the physicality is very clear’ said Anders Levermann, a climate scientist at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. “Hurricanes get their destructive energy from the warmth of the ocean, and the region’s water temperatures are super-elevated”. The third powerful hurricane in as many weeks, Maria, with 150 mph winds, made direct landfall on Puerto Rico, flattening much of the island and drenching it with feet of rain. A week after the storm hit, there was still no power on the island, except for the highest-priority buildings like hospitals, powered by emergency generators, which means in many places there’s no water to drink, no toilets. There’s limited food, fuel, and phone service, and it’s taken several days for reporters and rescue workers to reach remote towns and villages. “Make no mistake’ — said the Puerto Rico Governor, ‘this is a humanitarian disaster involving 3.4 million US citizens”.

Meanwhile, getting less coverage here but spreading its own destruction, ongoing drought has caused one of the worst US wildfire seasons in years, igniting blazes and massive fires across the west. Two weeks ago, almost 2 million acres of land were burning, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. There were more than 100 active wildfires and at least 41 uncontained large blazes were being battled by more than 25,000 responders, the National Guard, and half a battalion of active-duty soldiers. A staggering amount of land has burned so far this season — more than 8 million acres, along with more than 500 homes and other structures destroyed. But today I’m not dwelling on climate change – it’s now in the news every day.

As Al Gore says, “We have the answers for clean, safe, plentiful and reliable energy”. The amount of energy used by the whole world in a year falls on the earth from the sun – every 90 minutes! We just need the incentive, the planning and the legislation, and we *can* save the world. It cost me \$450 dollars to fully offset the emissions from my trip to Europe earlier in the year. I only buy renewable energy. And I haven’t put petrol in my car for months – only clean electricity! It can be done – and we *all* need to be doing it.

But it is not only hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria that hit the US across 3 crazy weeks. The ‘Make America great again’ cliché has given strength, as many anticipated, to those dangerous elements who want to make America white, straight and Christian again. Misogynist, anti-Mexican, anti-Muslim and anti-gay rhetoric, leading to anti-Jewish and generally racist sentiment as well. In August, far-right groups gathered at Charlottesville, among them former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, and marched, shouting ‘Jews will not replace us’. A counter rally as a cry for social justice attracted a peaceful crowd but this

ended in tragedy when a car was driven into them, killing Heather Hyer and injuring about 19 others. The Jewish community of this Virginia town hired security for the first time ever in fear of the rally, and removed their scrolls for safety. The Reform Movement coordinated an interfaith response to the violence, and called for constructive solutions to the hatred and vitriol dividing the nation. Our Rabbis in America participated in the 1,000 Ministers for Justice March in Washington DC, at the end of August, to demand that the Department of Justice live up to its name. Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner wrote: Our world is imperfect, and so we respond with hope. Our world is full of darkness, and so we respond with light.

It is by no means only America that is struggling with racism either - in France, in April, an elderly Jewish woman was hurled from her apartment window to her death by a neighbor, who had previously called her a dirty Jewess. In May, Marine Le Pen's Front Nationale failed to win the election, but however now claims to be the main opposition party.

In the UK, reports of anti-Semitic incidents have hit record levels, according to the Community Security Trust which said 767 reports were made to them between January and June - a rise of 30% on the same period last year. 80 incidents involved physical attacks - up from 45 in 2016. Chief executive David Delew said: "The hatred and anger that lies behind it is spreading." This is certainly not helped by the on-going anti-Semitic comments reported from the Labour Party members and conference.

In the past week in Germany we have seen the far right AfD party come out as the third largest grouping – the first time since the Nazis that an extreme right-wing party has been in parliament there. To a large extent Angela Merkel's drop in popularity was because of her robust and laudable stand on taking in nearly a million Syrian and Afghani refugees whilst the rest of Europe balked at doing so. One could point out that she bravely did the right thing – and she has still been re-elected to power, albeit without a majority.

Ten people have been arrested in a Neo-Nazi rally in Sweden, and a Nordic Resistance Movement march in Gothenburg later today could draw up to 1,000 people. Though the court has ruled that it can't go near the local synagogue, the organisers say they don't accept this decision. So let's think of the Gothenberg community at this moment.

We know, especially living here in Australia, how incredibly lucky we are to live in freedom. Yet even here, the government has just allocated \$200,000 to TBI to build a fortified entrance and guard house. This pattern of rising and well-founded concerns, in many countries and over a relatively short period, should make us pause to reflect.

As many of you know, our son Adam is spending a year in Israel with Netzer on their Shnat program, together with other school-leavers from LBC and the Melbourne and Australian progressive community. What an amazing opportunity – and I can't recommend it strongly enough as quite the best opportunity to help grow up, become more independent and self-sufficient, make friends for life, and learn about Israel and Jewish history on the spot!

The developing idea of a homeland for Jews arose because of the continuing and rising anti-semitism and attacks across a so-called civilised, emancipated and developing Europe. As we know, it took the most appalling genocide in history to bring about the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, followed immediately by attack from the five surrounding Arab countries, who ignored the process and democratic decision of the newly-founded United Nations. Just 19 years later, having survived the war of independence, Israel decisively won the six day war in 1967, tripling its area by capturing the entire Sinai desert, the Gaza strip, the Golan Heights and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The Six Day war, I am told, is routinely taught as an example of effective planning and strategy in modern warfare.

Israel won the war but sadly, as we know, has not won the subsequent peace, though in '79 it did make peace with Egypt by returning the Sinai, and in 1994 with Jordan. How sad that peace has not yet been made with Palestinians. However, we can look back at the past, as we do today over our own actions, but we know we can only influence the future, and often only then if there are parties who can be persuaded to share our hopes and aspirations.

Meanwhile, as Progressive Jews, as Jews who see women and men as equal, who welcome women to wear a tallit and read from the Torah, we have our own internal challenges to battle in Israel. As my colleague, Rabbi Micky Boyden, writes from Hod HaSharon near Tel Aviv, "When one reads about the way in which Bibi backtracked on the Kotel agreement, and the disgraceful manner in which the Women of the Wall are treated by the police and security personnel, one could be mistaken for believing that Progressive (Reform) Judaism is having a bad time of it in Israel. If you add to that the dislike that many feel for Israel's right-wing/religious coalition government, one can see why many Progressive Jews in North America and elsewhere are lukewarm about the Jewish State. However, it is time to put the record straight. Progressive Judaism in Israel is, by and large, an amazing success story. Thirty years ago there were only a handful of congregations and not one single purpose-built Progressive synagogue anywhere in Israel apart from at the Leo Baeck school in Haifa and HUC in Jerusalem. We were viewed as an American outpost, whose supporters were almost entirely from English-speaking countries. There were maybe two or three couples a year who dared have one of our rabbis officiate at their wedding. Fast-forward thirty years. There are some 50 Reform congregations across the country. Religious pluralism is part of the landscape, much to the dislike of the charedim, (who are trying even harder to stop our conversions). Many Progressive synagogues are being built on public land. We are inundated by couples wanting us to officiate at their weddings. These requests, and indeed, all of the Bnai Mitzvah ceremonies at which we officiate, come from so-called "secular" Israelis, disgusted by the religious establishment and looking for a liberal Jewish alternative.'

Now, though I don't usually read Issi Liebler, congregants forwarded me this reflection and it is also worth repeating: "Despite a dysfunctional and bigoted rabbinical establishment and extortion by the ultra-Orthodox parties holding the balance of power, there has been a genuine spiritual revival with greater observance and respect for tradition than in the past.

There is already evidence that economic and social pressures are beginning to have a profound impact, obliging the ultra-Orthodox to earn livelihoods and become more

integrated into the nation. Hopefully, this will also lead to the breakdown of haredi political extortion and the appointment of more enlightened rabbis to bring about urgently needed *reforms* in relation to conversion, marriage, education and national service....

In assessing our situation, we must reject the prophets of doom and gloom. We should recognize that we are the blessed generation of Jews who are privileged to live in an age of miracles and who have never been as well off as we are today.

Despite our dysfunctional government, internal divisions and external challenges, decade after decade we have been blessed with prosperity and strength. Polls show Israelis as among the happiest people on earth' concludes the normally right wing Issi Liebler.

And recently you might have seen Israeli left-wing politician Meirav Michaeli on Q&A – and even getting applause from the audience for Israel! Sue and I then went to hear her at Habonim, where we joined over 500 other Melbourne Jews. The message is that there is more cause for hope than you might have thought – and the world, and we, still need Israel, even if she has moved from our remarkable and exciting young country to a more mature one, still under existential threat from outside and within – and Israel needs us as well.

Just eleven days go, Netanyahu reiterated the cancellation of the Kotel deal and accused the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel of using their partnership in the Western Wall agreement as a clandestine way to gain recognition. The World Union for Progressive Judaism responded to his comments, saying: We find it reprehensible that Prime Minister Netanyahu, who often refers to himself as the 'Prime Minister of the Jewish People,' should issue a divisive and hurtful statement on the eve of Rosh HaShanah. Our aim in this time of reflection and repentance, as in every day, should be to unite the Jewish People and strengthen our connection and commitment to Israel, not to undermine it for the sake of political expediency.

Besides refusing to implement the governments' carefully negotiated agreement to make the kotel accessible to all Jews, Netanyahu has accused the movement of using the Kotel agreement as a "back door" to legitimization and recognition. On the contrary, we insist on using the front door. We are proud to be Reform, Progressive and Liberal Jews, and proud to be a part of Klal Yisrael. We intend to have our voices heard by every Israeli consulate around the world: Our Jewishness and our right to practice Judaism as we see fit in Medinat Yisrael cannot be denied or bartered away by a government or political coalition.

Of course, says Micky Boyden, many people don't like Bibi (and he knows one or two people who aren't that happy with Donald Trump either!) However, that doesn't stop us from loving our country and working for a better tomorrow. And he is right. So we are asking you to join the 'LBC Israel at 70 tour' next April to strengthen our support and connection with the Progressive movement there, and with Israel itself, over twelve memorable days!

Please resolve to join LBC in Israel in April. And let us remember - our world is imperfect, but our response should be with hope. Where our world seems full of darkness, let us respond with light. There are indeed lots of worries wherever we look – but there are also many opportunities to be active, proud Progressive Jews, as this New Year gets under way.