

## **EREV ROSH HASHANAH 5778 – JUDAISM IS EVER CHANGING**

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We have a member who works at Lake Mungo in South Eastern Australia, where, back in 1968, human remains were found which showed that indigenous peoples had lived in Australia for some 42,000 years. Just a few months ago in July we learned that dating an Indigenous rock shelter in the Top End near Kakadu pushes Australia's human history back to 65,000 years.

As I've said before, this makes Judaism's 4000 year history, 4000 New Years, seem rather less impressive by comparison, though I'm sure it is safe to say that our Jewish traditions have had a very significant, and certainly quite a disproportionate effect, on human history and indeed on the world.

It is clear, of course, that the mode of life 65,000 years ago was in many ways quite different to the way we live today, and doubtless the way human beings perceived themselves and their influence on the world has changed dramatically as well. I would however suggest that the pace of change has been increasing increasingly rapidly over the more recent period. Perhaps our Israelite early ancestors, nomadic, moving where there was food and water, having little idea of owning the land except to create a burial place to lay and respect their dead, would have had more in common with the indigenous peoples here than we might at first imagine – and than they do with us today. They too believed in a Creator spirit, and looked up at the vast expanse above them, and imagined the stars as the hosts of heaven, and told long, intricate stories about how their world had come to be.

It was perhaps since agriculture that the pace of development started to quicken exponentially, with the opportunity to produce surplus rather than subsistence leading to exchange and trade and ultimately to money, writing, mathematics, the invention of the Archimedes screw pump, improved irrigation, chariots, armaments, bows and arrows – you get the point!

Today it seems that the year flashes by so fast that Rosh Hashanah comes by like an accelerating marker, and things change so fast that it is increasingly difficult and challenging to keep up, whether in technology at home or at work. Indeed the boundaries are becoming rapidly so blurred that it is hard to keep a distinction between work and home life. And if technology is the pace-setter, it is certainly not the only thing – language and relationships are two other areas where change is also clearly evident on, it seems, an almost daily, certainly yearly, basis.

So I want to recognise that many things are indeed changing, and that our structures and institutions also change. This has always been the human condition, but never so fast as in our own times. No one in the world today worships God the way that Abraham and Sarah did – no one celebrates Shabbat as King David did. There have inevitably had to be changes, since Torah knew nothing of electricity or cars, in-vitro fertilisation or aeroplanes or space travel or the international date-line or telephones, or frozen food or antibiotics, or, for that matter, of even the southern hemisphere! It is interesting to note that for us, New year really does start as spring arrives, unlike in most of the Jewish world where it is autumn!

Our tradition is consequently a developing one – indeed a progressing one, and I would say, a Progressive one. It is time to stand up and be proud, and loud, and clear. Judaism is – and always has been – a Progressive tradition, and we are its inheritors. And yes, it has always had those who deny change, certainly any change suggested by others, but change has happened all the same. Because, without change, without responding to new situations and questions and challenges, any institution stagnates and becomes increasingly irrelevant and on the nose, until, ultimately, it is consigned to history!

I picture Judaism as a bus crossing the desert. The Progressives are out in front, struggling to pull it along on ropes. “It can move, it has to move, it will move”, they pant! But out the back, on equally taught ropes, are those who dig their heels into the sand, saying ‘it won’t move, it has never moved, it can’t move’. Whilst a few of the Jews stay on the bus, most of them have little interest in this tug of war going on and have walked away, either to watch and shake their heads in bewilderment and frustration from a distance, or just to get away and keep on going! Perhaps this is the real reason it took the Israelites 40 years instead of 40 days to cross the Sinai!

And yet, to some extent, it has been the ongoing tension, the arguments and disagreements, that has been the drive that has kept Judaism reasonably responsive and relevant through this 4000 year history. The Sadducees and the Pharisees, the schools of Hillel and Shammai, the burning of Maimonides’ writings, the Chasidim and the Mitnagdim – the conservatives and the progressives, the pro- and anti-Zionists, all on the Jewish journey.

This God of ours has changed, as we have changed. It seems clear that in the beginning, when the other peoples of the area believed in multiple gods – a god of the grain and a god of the rain, a sun god and a moon god, a fertility god and goddess, that our tradition did too. That’s the reason why Elohim is plural. In the beginning, the gods created the heavens and the earth. The children of the gods saw the daughters of humans, and married them, creating Nephilim, giants. And the gods were not forgiving. They didn’t like what humanity got up to, so they decided to drown the world and start again. And yet again, the humans tried to build a tower to reach the heavens – the heavens being the realm of the gods, whilst the earth was the human domain. “Let us go down”, says God, and we’ll mix up their speech. So in these stories, God still has elements of plural – and clearly God lives in the heavens – and that continues through Jacob’s dream of the ladder to heaven, and to Mount Sinai, and indeed to the Temple at the highest point in Jerusalem, high in the Judean hills.

Now today we know, and imagine we always knew, that God is not only in the heavens but everywhere – isn’t that what the Menorah, that becomes the Ner Tamid, teaches us? Well, no, I think that’s a later gloss. The Menorah was to give God light. Because once the tabernacle was built and covered with thick, waterproof dolphin skins and ram skins, it was also completely dark. The altar was to barbecue God’s meals, the libation offerings were to provide wine for God to drink, the incense was to keep it all smelling nice. The winged cherubs on the ark made a comfortable throne – a winged armchair, for God to sit upon. The Israelites did not think God was symbolically living amongst them – they thought this was really God’s new home – God’s dwelling place – that’s what Mishkan means, after all!

If God was all-powerful and everything happened for a reason, then if the ground shook, God was doing it. Though the Israelites were traversing the Jordan rift valley, the fact that it is the junction of the Arabian and African tectonic plates was surely unknown to them.

When the ground opened up and swallowed Korach and his family, this must have been a punishment from God – so Korach must have done something to deserve it! When Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's two sons, took their new, copper firepans out on a dry summer's evening, they were not aware that they would be a great target for the lightning that dry thunderstorms bring in the desert, but they were instantly killed by lightning – described as fire from heaven – so God must have done it – so they must have done something to deserve it! Was it that they had offered the wrong sort of fire, or were they perhaps drunk? When hundreds of Israelites die of the plague, it must be punishment from God.

It all sounds so silly that we don't dwell on it. But when my son Adam and I went to see The Book of Mormon, their beliefs also seem bizarre. They believe that a lost tribe of Israel sailed to America where they buried a scripture engraved on golden plates, which were discovered and translated by Joseph Smith in the 1820s. When you learn that God lives near the planet Kolob, it sounds quite crazy. Adam pointed out that, though our stories date back a few thousand years, and we're used to them, that doesn't make them sound much more plausible to the outsider. God descends in thunder and lightning and smoking fire and spends 40 days dictating the Torah to Moses, including the instructions on how to make the tabernacle, so that God can live comfortably in it, amongst the people! Adam has a point. What matters is how people treat each other and the world, based on their stories and beliefs. How they believe and interpret them is secondary, and, unless they try and impose them on others as the sole truth, it's personal and up to them.

So as we mark the start of this new year, and the start of this ten days of reflection and renewal, let's be quite clear that we are proud inheritors of a four thousand year old tradition – not the oldest, but one that has had enormous impact – and one that will continue to have influence, through us and our generation, to make a better, more caring world. Judaism is a tradition that has survived because it has changed and adapted and been reinterpreted and refined; it has lent and borrowed to remain relevant – and to best answer, in every age, the question: What does God want of us? God still wants us to be good people – better, kinder, more caring, more generous people – in a better, kinder, world. As we stand at the very beginning of this brand new year, that is our challenge.