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ROSH HASHANAH 5779 SERMON

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Last night I talked about change – how we can't avoid it, and that whilst it can often seem challenging and negative, it can sometimes also be positive – and I looked particularly at the suggestion that the changes we have seen worldwide in the past few years have certainly been influenced by, and may well be the result of, manipulations by major actors such as Russia. Political commentators – who in times past we would call Prophets – say that whilst the West has been complacent since winning the cold war, we may indeed be well on the way to losing what has been dubbed the post-cold-war – which is affecting our freedom in various ways, and which is exacerbating the divide between rich and poor, whether nations or individuals.

According to a report by The Guardian: 'The ranks of Australia's billionaires have more than doubled since the global financial crisis. Eight more individuals joined that category in Australia last year, and there are now at least 33 Aussie billionaires.

Over the same period, average wage increases slowed to record lows, barely keeping up with the cost of living, though the household wealth of average Australians did grow by about 1% per year.

The Oxfam Report, 'The Growing Gulf Between Work and Wealth', shows the top 1% of Australians now own more wealth than the bottom 70% combined, and that wealth inequality in Australia has been on the rise over the past two decades.

One commentator observes that the revolution has already started abroad – listing Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, Brexit, the massive presidential campaign-protests in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, and The Women's March in Washington, D.C. (and across the globe), after President Donald Trump's inauguration.

He adds the South African protests which toppled President Jacob Zuma and his cronies in February, street protests, all-out civil wars, and the US and Russia, who were drawing dangerously close to armed conflict in Syria.

Going back a bit, he adds Egypt and the so-called Arab Spring. Macedonia. Ethiopia. Brazil. Moldova. The Congo. Poland. Many countries have seen protests or uprisings against the establishment of some sort or another over the past decade. In Venezuela, inflation has reached 200,000 percent since a year ago, and the International Monetary Fund has predicted it will reach one million percent in 2018. We know what can happen when things get this out of control.

We shouldn't be surprised. When significant groups feel they or their concerns are being ignored, when they see growing inequality and feel injustice, what should they do? Especially when the political systems seem to be influenced or corrupted, or do not seem to respond to their needs – and the needs that scientists and experts are repeatedly warning us of - time after time? *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, our tradition reminds us in Deuteronomy – Justice, justice you should pursue – justice is the core and bedrock of any fair society. On this day, as the world celebrates another birthday, we acknowledge that Judaism is a religion of action as well as prayer. Indeed, the prayer is often about action – sometimes what we need to work on in ourselves – and sometimes how we ourselves need to work out in the wider world.

Our concern extends also to Israel – a land close to every Jewish heart. Our wish for Israel to live in safety and security is probably felt as strongly by most of us as we feel it for Australia – certainly I feel it most passionately. Whilst it is difficult to gauge from outside, and especially from this far away, quite what is happening and with what rationale, we only have to listen to the many concerned voices from within Israel to know that there are very significant challenges there as well. There too we see growing inequality, an increasing and impoverished underclass, and serious concerns about attacks from outside, sponsored by Iran and those whose most ardent passion seems to be to destroy Israel. The year has also seen what some are interpreting as an erosion of the rights of non-Jewish citizens, diminishing the authority of the Declaration of Independence, and of non-orthodox Jews. Certainly we can no longer be sure that someone who becomes Jewish under our auspices can go and live in Israel, as the ultra-orthodox influence becomes daily greater.

A retired colleague in the States, Rabbi Mordechai Shreiber, reminds us of the words of the prophet Jeremiah: 2500 years ago, Jeremiah, he tells us, saw the impending

destruction of Jerusalem, and the approaching Babylonian exile, while the official priests and prophets of Judea lived in a fool's paradise, believing God was on their side and would never abandon them. Jeremiah was not popular among the Jews of his time, and those who share their concerns today also put themselves in jeopardy.

Jeremiah, Rabbi Shreiber says, did not speak only to his own generation; he spoke to all generations, including ours.

As in the days of Jeremiah, he says, we are again in the midst of a profound spiritual crisis both in America and in the State of Israel, from which he has just returned.

Wake up, he urges us all. Neither the military might of the United States nor the military might of Israel will save either country if their moral foundation collapses, and indeed they have begun to show signs of collapse.

He asks: have we spoken enough truth to power, and have we taken to task the current government of Israel for driving a wedge between world Jewry and our Israelis brothers and sisters, and for excluding us from full participation in the religious life of the state?

I do believe that something momentous and important happened for Israel and for all Jews in this past year, and it may well indicate a shifting balance. It was a significant change and I hope will prove to be a change for the better. America moved its Embassy to Jerusalem, confirming a right that all other countries have without question – to determine where their capital is. I believe that Jordan and the Palestinians were given reassurances that this in no way precluded a Palestinian capital also being recognised in Jerusalem in due course. Funding that has been flowing to Palestinians for generations is being examined and questioned. And now, at last, people are beginning to ask why UNRWA, the UN's dedicated agency for Palestinian refugees, is still there, 70 years after 1948, and what is it doing, and why the definition of a Palestinian refugee is different from any other refugee the world has ever known. In the coming year we'll be running some sessions to study these matters as well, to understand them better, to make ourselves better informed, and then, perhaps, to add our voices to try to make change happen. I hope you'll join us.

This past Thursday I was in Wellington, where I sat on a Bet Din with my colleague Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon. Kinneret, who will be leading High Holy Day services in Wellington, has recently retired from over thirty years in the Israeli progressive rabbinate. Perhaps her most significant professional achievement was to create and build the congregation of Yozma in Modi'in, between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, a city intended to model the cooperation and harmony of Israeli society. Eventually, the municipality gave the community land to build, and after 20 years, they have a congregation of 1000 families, with 5 nursery schools! This is a huge achievement – a Rabbi proudly teaching and explaining Progressive Judaism – and a woman Rabbi at that – recognised and accepted by many in Modi'in. We are making important progress – and our voice and our perspective needs to be heard more and more, to call for justice, kindness, harmony, understanding, recognition – to help make Israel a more just, and a more calm and a more stable society – indeed it may sound naïve to say it, but if we believe that Judaism and Progressive Judaism still has something to offer to the world – and I certainly believe it does - then we still want and need to help Israel to be a light to the nations to assist it to get that message across.

We have a relatively small but dynamic and growing movement in Israel – and it has a small but hugely effective team who are helping a wide range of people there to have a voice, and to seek justice and change. It is called the Israel Religious Action Centre, and once again we have chosen it this year as the Israel recipient of our High Holy Day Appeal. I do hope you will support it generously and indeed consider ongoing support for its impressive and important work, just as we need your support to continue our work here at LBC, our local recipient this year!

In Wellington, the Bet Din saw four excellent candidates, three from their own community and one from Dunedin, the furthest South of any congregation in the world! Not one of them was seeking Jewish identity for marriage reasons, though of course there is nothing wrong with wanting to create a Jewish household as a starting reason for the journey to Judaism, either. But in this case, each was doing it because, as adults, they had discovered something precious and meaningful in Judaism, and specifically in our approach to Judaism, which they wanted to weave into their everyday lives, and indeed they were already doing so. When someone makes a conscious choice

to join themselves to the Jewish people, it should make us stop and take note, especially if we are Jewish because we happen to have been born into it, or perhaps we converted but have since moved on to other pursuits and interests. The High Holy Days is not just the time one may feel duty bound to make an annual appearance, but a unique opportunity to gather, with family and community, to review our lives and to take stock. It is a time to plan and initiate change for good, rather than to wait for changes around us to carry us along for good or bad.

I noticed when I looked out of the windows, there, on Shabbat, that I could see a house two doors down that I have not been able to see before – because the house next door has been demolished this week. The builders have kindly agreed not to work on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, so hopefully we will not be disturbed, but by next year there should be two brand new houses standing alongside the shul. And who knows, perhaps two Jewish families will move in and join up?! The planning to develop that site has been going on for a couple of years. And the planning for another project, even closer to home, has also been going on for the same length of time, and it too will be constructed over the coming year, and be with us by next Rosh Hashanah. I'm talking about our new Machzor – because Gates of Repentance, which we have been using for 41 years, will be replaced with a beautiful and stimulating new set of High Holy Day Books. Though it may be the only Machzor you've used, and feel comfortable and familiar, like the house next door, Gates of Repentance is actually worn out, has various structural problems, and has outlived its usefulness, and it's time to be replaced with two fresh new volumes.

The new book will match our Shabbat and daily prayer book Mishkan T'filah, and will be called Mishkan T'shuvah, but because it is two volumes, each will be lighter – Yom Kippur will only be the same weight as Gates of Repentance, and Rosh Hashanah even lighter. Like the siddur, it will have full transliteration and lots of creative material, as well as explanations and annotations on the page, enabling our services to feel challenging and stimulating and new, and yet still recognisably familiar. It has been planned to speak to us – but also to speak to the future, to our children and to all those who will come to use it in the next forty years or so.

You won't be able to follow the services from Gates of Repentance – for one thing, Yom Kippur will have an additional service. You will need to purchase copies for yourself and, if you have family, for them as well. We'll be distributing order forms, but there will only be one print run, and you will need to order by the end of December, so please don't leave it to late and miss out.

New prayer books are one of the features that identify Progressive Judaism. **Because** we believe in Progressive Revelation - that our understanding of the world, of our texts and stories – ultimately of what God requires of us – changes and develops every day, every year, every generation - our history has been marked by the publication of new prayer books. Language, interpretations of prayers and readings which may have worked well in the past may no longer be quite attuned to our ear and understanding. New interpretations and stimulating writing, even occasionally from non-Jewish sources, may throw new light on our special days, and keep them ever fresh and relevant and meaningful.

As the leader of the editorial group, I feel very confident that Mishkan T'shuvah is a change for the better, a sign of progress and hope and new understandings and insights into this most powerful period of the year. May it help us to see ourselves and our lives and our challenges and responsibilities even more clearly, as we set about examining our lives and making ourselves – and our family, and our world – more like they have the God given potential to be. I do hope that you will all order enough books so that every member of your family will have a copy, and by this time next Rosh Hashanah, you'll all be in complete agreement with me! For as well as being challenging and stressful, change - as the four new Jews in Wellington and Dunedin will tell you - can also be exciting, exhilarating, stimulating and renewing.