



CHANGE AND IMPERMANENCE – ONLY GOD IS ETERNAL.

I'm told that when the Rabbi observed, in her Yizkor sermon, that 'Every person here is going to die – there is no escaping that reality', someone in the congregation called out – 'I'm not a member – I'm just visiting'! But of course, regulars or visitors, none of us can escape the inevitable cycle of life. And in truth we are all visitors in this life!

On Rosh Hashanah I noticed a congregant was wearing shoes, beautifully polished so you could see yourself in them. They told me that these were the shoes they wore for their wedding. Over the cycles of the years, those shoes had witnessed, and reflected, many moments of joy and celebration, as well as some heart-rending tragedy. Yet all you could see was a pair of shining, inanimate shoes.

But is it possible, on occasion, to feel or learn or pick up some sense of momentous event from objects that we would consider inanimate? You may have visited a particular place where some famous or infamous world changing events happened – perhaps Tiananmen Square or Gallipoli? I remember the Arch of Titus, in Rome, built almost 2000 years ago to mark the destruction of the Temple, and close by, the Colosseum, built by our ancestors, actual or at least spiritual, marched in chains from a vanquished Jerusalem – all long gone, and almost none remembered by name or role or profession – but the places still stand witness. Or the Western Wall, infused with history, hope, bloodshed, destruction, tears, and newer hope and pain. Or, just round the corner, the Southern Wall, where two thousand years ago, our ancestors climbed the steps to the Temple with their offerings on Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, many of which remain there still today, and where the priests sung and the musicians played and the great shofar was sounded and resounded from the walls of the Jerusalem of the time. And I was struck strongly by the same feeling, the same awareness of Jews past, great leaders and insight, when I visited the Rabbi's Patio in the Jewish section of Gerona, in Catalonia, the tiny ghetto area from where Isaac the Blind introduced Kabbala mysticism from across the Pyrenees in France, and spread it throughout

medieval Spain, and from where, in 1492, the Jews were expelled, leaving behind a loaf in the oven, indicating their home to some day return.

So can there really be something that speaks from these inanimate objects, these stones, these places; or is it simply that we invest them with some of the characters and history we have learned, by now usually long buried and past, but who in their lives had prayed to and felt the same God in their lives as we seek today?

One of the many names of that Godly presence is Tzur Yisrael – Rock of Israel, and this is derived from one of the ways we describe God, because of course a rock has permanence. When I was growing up in a cold, grey Britain, my interpretation of rock was granite – cold, grey, heavy, hard, solid, unbreakable. It made sense to me then that God was so solid, unchangeable, unimpressionable, unmoving.

Then I was lucky enough to spend 5 days trekking in the Sinai desert. We walked along wadi valleys cut deep into the sandstone. We slept under the stars in the shelter of the rock walls, enjoying the warmth that they radiated from the sun of the day as the air rapidly cooled in the cloudless night. The rock stayed warm, and it was soft. You could rub it away with a finger, turning it into sand. As the sun returned, we could see all sorts of colours in it: whites, creams, pinks, oranges, blues, greys - layered as an ancient sea bed had been laid down and then dried out and been lifted and folded by unimaginable forces. This rock was not at all cold and unmoving like granite – it was warm, responsive, welcoming, protecting - this suggests not that God is hard and unchanging but the opposite - that God changes as human perception and understanding changes – indeed that God changes as we change. This too made sense to me - this living desert sandstone was why our wise teachers called God a rock.

Of course, these wise teachers are in the category of our predecessors. It is only in writing this word in the context of this Yizkor memorial service that I have realized that predecessor means those who have died before us – pre-deceased us! Yet their insight, their wisdom, continues to infuse our understanding.

At the end of the Aleinu prayer, first used in the High Holy Day services and only later introduced into every service, after we've acknowledged our responsibility to bring

knowledge of God to the world, we sing 'Bayom Hahu yihyeh Adonai Echad, u'shmo echad' – the day will come when God's name will be One, and known as one. Rabbi Henry Slonimsky, a loved and revered Dean of Hebrew Union College in New York for many years, and, since 1950, another predecessor, explained that: "Maybe God and perfection are at the end, and not [as we usually assume], at the beginning. . . For how can God be called one, if humankind is rent asunder in misery and poverty and hate and war? [Only] when humankind has achieved its own reality and unity, will [it] thereby have achieved God's reality and unity. Till then God is merely an idea, an ideal: the world's history consists in making that ideal real. In simple religious earnestness' therefore, says Rabbi Slonimsky, 'it can be said that God does not exist. Till now God merely subsists in the vision of a few great people's hearts, and exists only in part, and is slowly being translated into reality."

That's a pretty radical idea! God is a concept, an ideal, an idea in the making, and only becomes a reality when humanity is peaceful and harmonious – when the earth reflects what we imagine the heavens, and God, should be like!

In the meantime, we continue to celebrate and laud and praise and glorify God – or is it just the concept of God? - and make God's name known across the world – and this is indeed one of our tasks. The erosion of the knowledge of God, grain by grain, person by person, generation by generation, can also diminish God, imperceptibly but not insignificantly. Atom by atom, our world can continue on the path to being a little less godly – a bit more god-less – where people look only after themselves, and steal from others and from a faceless society – where some people think nothing of – or even pride themselves on – defacing other people's property with graffiti, signing their tag, or murdering their partner or even their children, wife and mother in law, as we saw just last week, or go into Port Arthur, or too many schools around the world, with a machine gun, and kill as many students and teachers as they can.

Even as philosophers may say God is just an idea in development, still we also talk of God as Eternal – and in that regard, God is unique - nothing else is eternal – not us, not flora and fauna, not the burning stars, indeed not even the coldest, hardest rocks. The sandstone turns readily back to sand over the centuries, but even the granite crashes to the ground and is washed to the sea and is smashed and eroded to smaller

rocks and pebbles and ultimately to sand – until it settles to the bottom and is dried out or compressed or melted in some gigantic geological drama – a drama continuously unfolding. God is indeed eternal, and without end – but if we don't allow God into our daily lives, and if we don't spread God's message with our lives, then grain by grain, the knowledge of God will diminish and falter. And as mere human beings, we cannot fathom the meaning of a God who is no longer known or recognized in the world.

May we gain some consolation that those we have loved and lost, our predecessors, are never truly lost to the world, to the universe. They have influenced and changed the world, the world that they considered theirs, and we consider ours, and in due course will be inherited by those who come after us, to whom we, in our turn, will be predecessors, in ways smaller and larger. In truth, we know that the world, and the time, belongs to none of us, but only to God.

So, as we say in the funeral service, 'teach us to measure our days'. Let us not put off till tomorrow, or next year, or never, what we should do today. For none of us knows if we'll be here by this time next year – or even tomorrow, if we are able to be completely honest with ourselves. We never know what the year will bring.

In that vein, I see that I concluded last Year's Yizkor sermon, still believing we'd have the new Machzor by now, and it was not until last November that it was agreed that it would be delayed, but that it will certainly – well as certainly as anything in life can be certain – be introduced for next year, 2019, 5780! This is how I concluded last year, and it still seems just as apposite:

Our new machzor will be full of wonderful prayers and consoling readings, and a moving new Yizkor service. We pray that we will all be together in a year's time to use it.

So as we come together at this Yizkor service to share together our sadness and anguish, remembering our loved ones, may our memories strengthen our resolve to redouble our efforts to use the time and energy we do have in this coming year in the building of a better world to hand on to future generations. Amen.