



**YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU MIGHT CHANGE.**

*Atem Nitzavim hayom kulchem* – ‘Here you are today,’ started our Torah portion – ‘all of you – standing up to be counted!’

God knew – or our ancestors who could imagine what God might know, back then, over three thousand years ago – they knew, that not all Jews would pray every day, or even go to shul once a week or month! That indeed there are many ways to be Jewish, to be identified and to feel oneself to be Jewish, without necessarily coming to pray the words.

But they also knew that there were special occasions where all Jews would gather – family celebrations, family bereavements – and High Holy Days – this unique, once a year period when we have to open the partition – or, for some congregations, and as we used to before we remodelled the synagogue – when they have to transfer to a civic hall.

Even if Jewish people are travelling or working overseas, the pull is still remarkably strong. On Rosh Hashanah last week, my friends, on a cruise, went to a shipboard service. Here at LBC we had members of The Liberal Synagogue, Elstree, where I was the Rabbi in Britain, join us, as they were in Melbourne for work, and another two last night. We always get a few requests from visitors. Last year we hosted Rochelle Dreyfuss, a Professor of Law from New York University, who sent us a very appreciative letter after her visit:

We are in Melbourne’, she wrote ‘because I’m on sabbatical at Swinburne with my husband. We wound up at LBC because while still in New York, I emailed a few synagogues that seemed to be fairly near Hawthorn and told them we were arriving just before Rosh Hashanah and could we come to services. The others seemed reluctant to have us, but LBC wrote me the sweetest email, welcoming us to come along.

Coincidentally, my host at Swinburne knew Ede Horton, one of your congregants, and Ede included us in her family's Rosh Hashanah dinner, and then sat with us in shul so we felt very much at home. Ede's son Max invited us to break the fast with him – so we really felt like family.

There is something tremendously touching about coming half way across the globe and hearing the same prayers, sung, more often than not, with similar melodies (and just enough different ones to make it interesting).' Rochelle concluded that three days without hearing the words "Donald Trump" was also a blessing – so I won't mention him!

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The Board at LBC this year has taken up the suggestion that I think was from President Jim, that we adopt a theme for the year – and you will have seen in various places that for 5779 it is 'Engaging with Community'. The 'community' part is pretty wide – fellow Jews at LBC, or across Melbourne, or across the world, wherever your travels, or internet explorations, may take you. And Jewish or not, other faiths or no faith; community can be taken in a multitude of ways. 'Engaging' is somewhat more specific. It requires some action to get it under way, whether saying hello, or sending an email, or arranging to visit. Indeed, there are people who go on holiday to distant places, with very different communities, and then sit in the hotel or on the beach and have no engagement whatsoever! But clearly the Board – and our tradition – feel it is a good or even an essential thing - any rabbi or sociologist or psychologist or health professional will tell you it is essential for health and development – that isolation is bad, and of course the worst punishment in our prison systems is solitary confinement. People are naturally social animals, strengthened by engagement with others. You never know what you might learn or discover, and you rarely find out what impact and effect you may have on those you meet and with whom you interact.

I was reminded of this because two weeks ago I went to run a stand for the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change at a garden party in Toorak, at a great organization called Initiatives of Change. Their name always reminds me of the aphorism 'Be the Change you want to see in the world', attributed to Ghandi. Actually,

what he said was “If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a person changes their own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards them. ... We need not wait to see what others do.”

Gandhi is saying that personal and social transformation go hand in hand - there is no suggestion in his words that personal transformation alone is enough! However I’m sure you agree that the condensed version is more memorable! And Gandhi does say we must take the first step – be the initiative that starts the change.

Anyway, a Burmese lady came up and introduced herself to me. “I owe you a great debt of thanks”, she said. “You spoke at an interfaith event at Swinburne University some years ago, soon after I and my group had arrived from Burma. A member of the group had just died, and it took us a week to get him buried. We thought that the law required this time. As Burmese Christians, especially newly arrived in Australia and having to work very long hours, that was difficult for us, since it is our tradition to sit with, and accompany, the body until burial. But you told us that the Jewish tradition is to bury quickly, and that we should speak to the coroner in future and say we’d like it to be done as quickly as possible. And the next time, we did so, and since then it has gone smoothly and speedily, and relieved us of much pressure and anxiety. And because we are doing it, other Burmese groups across the country are now empowered to do it as well – so thank you, thank you, thank you!”

I could barely recall the conference, let alone sharing that information – but clearly she had! It was good to hear, and great to know that our experience has been transferred to another part of our rich, great, diverse Australian community – and also that Jewish experience was being acknowledged and appreciated, which, sadly, as we know, is not always the case.

So at this time of change – not only change forced upon us from the pressures of a changing world – but also the change we choose and commit to for ourselves, for our coming year; here today, I’d ask you to choose, however much you already engage, to engage a bit more with community in the coming year. Why not start with LBC? We understand that modern life is busy. We really appreciate your support and membership even if you don’t come along more than a few times a year. We know that

maintaining a Jewish community is expensive, and that membership is a significant part of your expenditure. However, a large number of our members work hard with me and our dedicated staff to have such a rich and varied spiritual, educational and social program that we are very proud of, and there must be something more that takes your fancy in the year ahead. Our informative Profile magazine, as well as weekly eProfile messages should keep you up to date, and you should always be able to check up what's happening on our website, [lbc.org.au](http://lbc.org.au). We hope you'll remember this message, and make the effort to engage more – and get more from your membership in the coming year!

But we also hope you'll engage more widely with the broader community – and carry the message, implicitly and perhaps sometimes explicitly, that you are doing it as a Jew, and because you are a Jew, and perhaps even that it was part of your New Year reflections. We have a full and mostly wonderful history, tradition, culture. Even when it hasn't been so good, as we'll recall in this afternoon's service, we have learnt and taken from the experience, to enrich ourselves and to pass on to the world.

So please take a moment now to ask yourself: Do you feel confident of your Jewish knowledge, your understanding of Jewish history and belief, of Hebrew, of theology and philosophy? If not, what will you do to strengthen it, with so many opportunities on offer? Do you feel proud of your religion and the impact it has undoubtedly had on the world? Do you allow yourself to feel proud when you see Israeli rescue teams helping with disasters worldwide? Do you feel better after spending time in shul with community on Yom Kippur? Do you want to change something in your life – at least a bit? And if so, reflect on what. And then think about how. What is the first step you can commit to now? Even the longest journey, as they say, needs that first step – an initiative of change. What about pausing to think about change for a moment, just as you are waking up each morning. That in itself would help facilitate it – to remind you and to refocus the day, to allow a tiny bit of change in yourself, change that will rub off on the world around you!

We all need a goal to work towards – a vision of the future, a vision often in too short supply. And so, as we read in the Yom Kippur T'filah, U'vchen tzadikim yiru v'yismacha – 'may God give us a vision bright with joy, a world where evil has no voice, and the

rule of malevolence fades like a wisp of smoke. Good people everywhere will celebrate the sight of arrogance wiped from the earth.'

This is a vision worth cherishing – even just the image of the wisp of smoke dispersing and disappearing – is certainly worth working towards. Let us make the changes that will help us, and our world, engage with each other, engage with a stronger, more caring community, from this moment on, for the rest of the year, and for the rest of our lives. Amen.