



A Rabbi dies – it happens to all of us - and goes to heaven. As they get to the gates, they hear a band of singing and dancing angels approach and assume it is to welcome them. The lead angel approaches the Rabbi and asks if they would mind stepping aside for a moment. Slightly surprised, the Rabbi does so and the angels pass out of the gates and encircle a person who has also approached the entrance. This person is wearing the drivers uniform of the Israeli Egged bus company. The joyous parade of angels carry the bus driver in past the Rabbi. When the parade is gone, an angel returns to the Rabbi and says, "You can come in now." The angel begins to lead the Rabbi inside. The Rabbi, somewhat confused, says, "I'm not one to make waves or complain, but I need to know something. I think I've been a good Rabbi. I've worked hard all my life. Why is it that the Egged bus driver gets led in by a band of angels ahead of me?" The angel answers, "Well, frankly, Rabbi, whenever you preached, people slept. But whenever they drove their bus, people prayed!"

I thank Bnai Brith for printing that story, and particularly Michael Taft, for sending it to me. I think there is a certain poetry that it came from Michael, who has worked so hard to maintain our ritual activities over the years.

Because what it is really saying is that the angels, or heaven, or God, measure our worth by the intensity and fervour of our prayers. But on this day, the last of the ten days of penitence, when we believe we are in some way being judged, is that really the measure by which we want to be considered?

We are not a deeply spiritual generation. Few of us say prayers when we wake up or before we sleep, let alone attend services daily or even weekly. We try to teach the students in religion school to say blessings over our food, but most of them have never heard them. When we have our monthly Friday night

dinner, or Chavurah lunch, we sing Birkat Hamazon after we have enjoyed the food, but who does it in their own home?

For whatever and various reasons, many of us still gravitate to shul on this, the most holy day of the year, to be here. I feel there is a book to be written about this and other aspects of our faith, called *The Geniuses of Judaism*, highlighting the brilliant ideas which we too easily overlook or take for granted.

Both Isaac Disraeli and more recently Bernard-Henri Lévy have published 'The Genius of Judaism' but it seems to me that there are some specific and distinct jewels, each of which is a stroke of genius in itself, cut, polished, enhanced and developed over the centuries, which is why I'd go for the plural form, geniuses. And foremost amongst these is of course Shabbat – an idea that we have given to the world that there should be a day of rest in each week. This concept gives time texture – every day is not the same – and gives it a cycle – six days of work and then a day of rest, or, as Genesis could have said, had it anticipated the two day weekend, on the first day God went shopping, on the subsequent five days God created the world and universe, and on the seventh, God enjoyed a good rest! Scholars tell us that in the ancient near east there was an occasional holiday called *sappatu*, given at the discretion of the kings, which may be the origin of the word shabbat - but the idea that it was a regular weekly entitlement, and for all, even for man-servants and maidservants and animals – that seems to be a truly Israelite innovation.

But if shabbat is genius, it contains within it another, discrete part, and that is the commencement of shabbat – Friday night. Particularly in our busy lives, when different members of the family are often out at various places, and food is frequently grabbed on the run or in front of the news, the idea of sitting down together, with the TV off, with a white tablecloth, to enjoy a candlelit dinner, perhaps with friends, is itself a gift of an opportunity. And of course

there are blessings – for candles, for wine, for challah. Many people do them. Perhaps they also bless the children. There is a longer part – the blessing for shabbat, and I suspect fewer people sing that. So this year we have started doing it together at shul on Saturday at kiddush, to familiarise people with it.

Then there is Bar Mitzvah – Son of the commandments - traditionally the Jewish way to mark puberty. Boys of this age were allowed to lead the service, and count as part of a minyan. Having prepared carefully, they were called up for the first time, in front of their community, and though no doubt often daunting, it seems always to have been a significant moment of leaving childhood, of being the centre of attention and of being treated differently from then on. Girls had a similar term – bat mitzvah – a daughter of the commandments – but they did not traditionally have to prepare or perform – rather it indicated that they were approaching marriage, home keeping and motherhood!

Within the Progressive Jewish community, we have for generations tried to treat boys and girls the same, and today we take great pride in our young women leaving childhood and reading and leading and teaching us every bit as capably as the boys.

Very recently, however, we have become aware of something our rabbis of the Talmud had an inkling of over 1500 years ago. They had five different terms for people whose physical sex was unclear or mixed. Today we are told that there are more gender uncertain people around than there are redheads. We do not live in a binary world – not everything is black or white. And not everyone is male or female, bar or bat. Since some of our twelve year-olds may be aware of a tension between the gender identity they feel and that they have been assigned, and since others may be confused or uncertain, we are starting to use a new term, beyt mitzvah – the house of commandments.

Anyway, whether bar, bat or beyt, I have no doubt that this process of marking the leaving of childhood and celebrating the journey to adolescence and adulthood is another significant genius of Judaism – and we are in the middle of a bumper crop this year!

We don't have much to mark other stages of life – adulthood or retirement – but we do have a clever but rarely used 2<sup>nd</sup> BM – at 83. Because as we heard, Psalm 90 defines a normal lifespan as 70 years, the Rabbis said we should start counting again from 70 – so if we hit 83, it is another 13 years, or time to celebrate BM again. My Australian mentor Rabbi Richard Lampert in Sydney just celebrated his, a couple of weeks ago

Before aging, in the normal run of life, comes marriage, and the wedding canopy, the Chuppah, is symbolic - open to all, it represents the new home being established, and emphasizes hospitality. In this afternoon's Torah portion, we will read 'V'ahavta l'reiecha kamocho' – you shall love your neighbor as yourself – and though love between a couple is of course different to that between neighbours, it is clearly recognized as a powerful driver for family and community harmony and well-being. The contemporary American philosopher Dr Cornell West makes a useful distinction here, stating that love in private is tenderness. Loving our neighbour in public is demonstrated by justice – and of course this is spelled out with the phrase Tzedek tzedek tirdof – emphasising the pursuit of justice. To establish justice as the fundamental basis for society is also in itself an act of genius of which we should be proud.

It is also worth noting that, even from biblical times, there is a recognition that marriage does not always work out – that people may grow in different directions, or be incompatible, or fall out of love - and that there needs to be a mechanism for this that protects the wife as much as the husband, and of

course the children. It shows insight and wisdom, if not genius, to allow for a way out of this important structure as well as a way in.

Many of these factors which I consider geniuses of Judaism, it should be noted, are not necessarily spiritual or prayerful – they are community, cultural, people-oriented. And that is what this morning's Torah portion says. You may have noted that we read more of the portion than we used to. The first eleven verses of chapter 30 have been reintroduced. They acknowledge the blessings but also the curses of life. We might consider these verses to be a riff on the theme of this period, teshuvah. God will return us from physical exile, return us from captivity. Even if we have been sent beyond the horizon, God will take us back! We will return – and here it spells it out – heeding the voice of God, and observing the commandments. Though this was doubtless written with physical return to Israel in mind, we can understand it, especially because of this last section, as a return to God's commandments and mitzvot. The section concludes: God will rejoice in your well-being, as in your ancestors before you, because you will heed the voice of your Eternal God, keep the mitzvot and laws, and return with all your heart and all your being to your Eternal God.'

But I want to immediately say that this is not a plea to become more religiously observant in the sense that it is traditionally understood. Most of these commandments are more like what we would call Social action – and this is an intrinsic aspect of the message – because we are God's hands, we are God's tools. Another genius to add to our list, then, is Shutfut – working in partnership with God. God cannot make a better and fairer world without us.

And here's perhaps the best of all. Judaism has always adapted and changed. The idea that it has always been the same is nonsense. No religion stays static as the world around it changes. Sometimes these changes are slower and more gradual and subtle – sometimes revolutionary and transformative. With

the destruction of Solomon's Temple and the end of sacrifices and jobs for the priests, and the exile to Babylon in 586 Before the Common Era, the core of the faith was dramatically re-formed, reconstructed, more liberal, progressed!

In our own time, we need to make sure we continue to respond to new needs – and new generations of books are a small sign – but institutions need to examine themselves – and in this, our 70<sup>th</sup> year, we have launched a project, named ReJewvenation – to do just that. It is clear that, throughout the world, organised religion is under threat. In an open society, people are marrying those from other faith traditions, or none. Indeed, there seems to some to be less need for religious community than there was – certainly there are many diversions – and in recent years and months, major religious institutions seem to have been increasingly good at shooting themselves in the foot. I hope that we who are here today can agree that religion has significantly more value than is often acknowledged, but there are many who, lumping fundamentalism, exclusive truth and warmongering together with more sophisticated and nuanced approaches, would argue that it is all more trouble than it is worth.

The word Synagogue suggests, to most people today, an institution that is about God and prayer. The Hebrew for that is Bet t'filah. But we use the Greek word Synagogue, which actually means House of Assembly, which comes from the phrase Bet Knesset, the place where the community gathers and celebrates. And Judaism has a third term as well – noting a third function – bet midrash – a house of study. All three of these functions – community and meeting and culture and social action, together with study and of course prayer, should be happening in a dynamic Jewish congregation – and the umbrella term Centre for Judaism has therefore always seemed to me to be more useful, more descriptive, less narrow and limiting, than the term

Synagogue. Indeed, having come to this conclusion many years ago, it was one of the many things that attracted me to the Leo Baeck Centre.

We have a host of things going on here, or from here. And they are by no means all about prayer, or dependent on a belief in a God who does spectacular magic tricks, rainbows and floods, or indeed any God at all.

But to return, again, – perhaps one of the greatest acts of genius is to set aside a whole profound day to gather as a community, and to reflect on our own lives, and that of the community of which we are a part. What sort of a year has it really been. What did we get right – what have we screwed up? And most importantly, what can we change – about ourselves, about the community? Not eating or drinking is a small sacrifice for the benefit of concentrating, delving deeper into ourselves, avoiding distractions, prevaricating. The prayers, the unique and powerful music, the reflections, have all developed to assist in making this perhaps the most unique and effective day in the year.

In this powerful day, and in the other geniuses of our tradition, we have something truly holy and special. I believe others have an inkling, and perhaps it is sometimes a driver for anti-semitism. But I am not sure we ourselves are always aware enough of how special it is. Let us own and celebrate what we have as Jews, and welcome others who would like to learn more and share it.