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קהלה קדושה שמע ישראל

Today a New Year begins. It is exactly six months since we sat at our seder, marking that formative transition of our people, from slavery to freedom. It is not coincidental that it is the opposite side of the year, because Pesakh marks a physical, communal redemption - albeit millennia ago - and Rosh Hashana and the ten days of Repentance culminating in Yom Kippur adds the opposite pole as well - a spiritual, personal opportunity for redemption. But the fact that it is a New Year as well as a period of Atonement shows us that however well we might atone individually, we live and breathe in the context of community as well - if society is sick, we cannot thrive, however sincere our atonement. So, for the new year, the Committee has decided on the theme of 'Strength in Community', which will be addressed throughout the year. And of course this communal emphasis is reflected in the plural used in our prayers through this period - **Avinu Malkeinu** - *our* parent, *our* sovereign, and **Al khet shekhatanu** l'faneicha - for the sins **we** have sinned before you -

Our personal journeys to atonement should not have started today though - that is like standing on the starting blocks of a marathon without having done any training or limbering up. The whole of the past month of Elul was supposed to be training, getting in the mood, tuning in to the opportunity that begins today for a fresh start, a life reset, a clean page. Rabbi Israel Salanter said 'Most people start their repentance during the week of s'likhot before Rosh Hashanah, and only the more pious use the whole month of Elul. But I say one should begin repenting immediately after Yom Kippur! That is to say, repent and repair as soon as you err, and don't wait till the New Year period comes round!

But if you haven't given it a thought until now and I suspect our congregation may not all be as devout as Rav Salanter liked to believe that his was — at least you are here together with us, as a community, ready and willing to start!

Today, and through this whole period, is a time of transition. Every day, yesterday becomes the past, but today a new year starts, and the whole of the old year and not just the past day can therefore be put to rest. As I read in a book commenting on trite pseudo-psychology and self-help, yesterday is history and tomorrow is a mystery - it is simple, but it is also true, and in a sense the message for today - none of us knows what tomorrow will bring. We live in the present, hopefully informed and learning from the past, but also impelled to a future where we will manage to achieve more of our potential, and help to make a better society and world.

Our world has changed substantially over the past year. This is our third High Holy Days after Covid hit, but the first since we have felt somewhat safer in gathering, and are no longer having enforced lockdowns. 7 months ago, on 24th February, Vladimir Putin commenced a Russian invasion of Ukraine, with its President Zelensky, who happens to be Jewish, standing up bravely to the pressure, rather than running away as Putin seems to have expected. Zelensky has become a brave symbol to his people and the world as a result. But not only has this been devastating for Ukraine, but also damaging for Russia, and, by extension, to Europe and the rest of the world because of their dependence on Russian gas.

The stock market and housing are finally showing the falls expected much sooner after Covid struck, as interest rates rise dramatically. And now Putin is mobilising Russians and intimating nuclear attacks, either with weapons or on nuclear power stations, as he struggles to reverse Russia and the region back into the Soviet and cold war eras. On Saturday something happened that has never happened to me before. I was passed a note, asking me to say a prayer for peace and a change of heart for Putin, and though I would do so, I am also reminded of Pharaoh - after bringing the plagues and destruction upon himself and his country, God, so to speak, hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that he and his innocent people would learn the lesson and never repeat the mistake. Putin, I believe, has dug himself into a hole and it will be a remarkable miracle if he turns around and admits the scale of his miscalculations and starts to repair the incalculable damage already done.

As if threats from Russia weren't sufficient, there is growing concern about China's increasing belligerence, especially for our own region, and the fact that we are going ahead with the nuclear submarines instead of conventional ones reinforces this fear, though the strategy of deterrence is a scary, risky and high-stakes one.

In May, in a nail-biting general election, the liberal party was ousted, and even their expected new leader and our local MP Josh Frydenberg was overthrown by the Independent Dr Monique Ryan - both of them spoke here in the lead-up to the election. Australia's self-destructive denial of our impacts on climate change rapidly started to transition, as the country finally got what the liberals still seemed quite intent on ignoring. A few months later, in July, Leo Baeck's own transition to a greener institution was completed with the installation of our 10.4kw solar panels on the roof above your head, which might feed around 60 kw into the grid on every sunny day. Various other important changes are already under way in Australia, including an effective integrity commission, which I believe will all help to make the country a fairer and kinder place, though there is still a long way to go, and a lot of ground to make up.

Sadly but not surprisingly, at the end of June, Israel's broad-based coalition government, finally including an Arab party for the first time, folded, and Yair Lapid became caretaker Prime Minister. The months since may turn out to have been a crucial period for him and the country, as the next elections, the fifth in 4 years, are still five weeks away, after the festivals, on 1st November. The Israeli electorate, deeply polarised as is the US and many other countries, will need to decide between centrist Prime Minister Lapid on the one hand, or Netanyahu yet again, increasingly and desperately allied to an extremist and anti-Arab right wing. Some experts are already predicting another hung parliament leading to a sixth election! Personally I will be very unhappy if Israel chooses Netanyahu again, after having shown that he is clearly not the only person capable of leading the country and that there are more harmonious and consensus ways to do so! So, a time of transition for Israel indeed!

And of course LBC is also in transition, as are Sue and I, as we come towards the end of twenty years here. LBC is trying to work out its future leadership, whilst Sue and I set off for some travelling before eventually settling into the Narara Ecovillage in Gosford, New South Wales, to be part of a strong and committed demonstration community that we will be helping to strengthen and develop further. Our children, who both celebrated their B'tei Mitzvah here at LBC, have left the nest, and indeed Mia has returned to live in London - though why is beyond me, what with the weather, the chaos in the wake of Brexit, the energy prices, and the crazy Boris Johnson who has just been deposed and replaced by Prime Minister Liz Truss.

The shock of these latest government upheavals must have caused extra stress on 96 year old Queen Elizabeth II. A couple of days after accepting Boris' resignation and his replacement to office, the Queen, who has reigned through all my life and for all or the great majority of our lives for all of us, died, and last week was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey, and Charles has become King. We have yet to see if he will propose a different model of relationship with Australia, where he went to school at Geelong Grammar, and the New Year may begin to show us.

In so many ways, the world around us is very different from just a year ago. And yet, here we are again, on the eve of a New Year, having been through another challenging year, and not knowing what the next will bring, but still intent on being the best we can be, doing the best we can do with whatever comes our way. And we know too that we'll again fall short, disappoint ourselves. In letting ourselves down, we also let down the Spirit of the Universe before whom we make these heartfelt pledges, prayers and commitments. Yet we also know that making the effort, seeking to be serious and insightful, is much better than doing nothing at all!

We have just sung Avinu Malkeinu again, the anthem of this period. We could read into it the two aspects of this period - that of close, family, parent-child relationships with Avinu, as well as those of our link as part of society, of government and leadership, with Malkeinu, a reminder of the need for strong layers of community, rulership, law and justice and equity.

So when we return to our homes shortly, let us do so with renewed joy and hope in our hearts. Our society and world is transitioning, and we can do so as well. We can be renewed and refreshed. We can do better. Our tradition had a name for transition long before that term was in use - T'shuvah. It is not only being tossed about by the waves of change, but taking responsibility for trying to steer ourselves to a better self, in a better time. Our coming year, and the world, will be significantly better if we make this effort and commitment than if we don't even bother to try, because it is just too much and too challenging!