**Reflection on Parsha Nitzavim**

September 2014

There are some words that appear repeatedly in today’s text: stand, today, you and your children, your heart, the blessing and the curse.

For me the first operative word is “today”. In this word is captured the moment when we can change something, when procrastination is not on the agenda. The next one in importance is “stand”, which suggests attentiveness to the moment, before actually moving and doing.

When do we stand, attentive, during the day, today, every day?

One of the daily activities of Jewish people who observe liturgy is scheduled community prayer: morning, afternoon, evening. The pièce de résistance, so to speak, the main prayer,is the Shmona Esrei; it is said standing, at full attention to the words uttered. When one turns to the structure of these blessings, one notes that the first and last three recur all the time; the middle blessings are the ones that vary according to weekday versus Shabbat, versus Festivals. On weekdays, the middle blessings are petitions; the fourth blessing goes something like this:

“You grace human beings with knowledge and teach mortals discernment. Grace us with the knowledge, discernment and understanding that come from You. Blessed are You, Eternal, who graces us with knowledge.”

The commentary I bring to you about this blessing I found in a lovely book called “The Explorer’s Guide to Judaism”, which was published by Rabbi Jonathan Magonet in 1998.

The first request of the community of Israel is for knowledge. It is possible that this statement that knowledge has been given to humanity by God as an act of “grace” is a rabbinic assertion that the knowledge gained by Adam (the word used in the blessing for “human beings”) on eating from the tree in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:17) should not be seen negatively, and certainly not as a fall from divine grace. This knowledge, however we came by it, is ultimately a given, a fact of life, granted to us by God, with which we are equipped to survive in the world. The word Knowledge here is the same as that used of the tree in the Garden-“of the knowledge of good and evil”. However this phrase in biblical terminology seems to signify “all things” and not just a moral distinction between good and bad. The same word is used of “sexual knowledge” between Adam and Eve when she first conceives. It is therefore a knowledge that is intuitive and grows through intimacy and relationships with others. The word “discernment” come from a word meaning “between” and suggests learning how to discriminate. It implies refining our ability to distinguish and clarify in the intellectual and moral sphere. The third term, “understanding” seems to mean intellectual ability, though it also contains the sense of appropriate and wise conduct that leads to success, material and spiritual, in the world-

In the Amidah blessings that follow, this understanding leads us to recognize our distance from God and the need continually to repent/return and ask forgiveness and pardon from God.

These blessings lead in turn to requests for the welfare of the individual and the community and a series of petitions for the restoration of the Jewish people to its land, with all the messianic overtones.

Another activity that occurs standing, daily, at minyan, is the Mourners’ Kaddish.

The second interesting book I read this summer was “Kaddish: Women’s Voices”, edited by Michal Smart and Barbara Ashkenaz in 2013. In it, several women narrate their experience of mourning a parent, and their choice and effort to say Kaddish for eleven months, in various North American communities, ranging from inclusive, warm and consoling communities to unpleasant, disparaging and rude ones and with every shade in between. One text stands out: Shifra Aviva Posner Deren wrote: “Why I did not say Kaddish.” I was intrigued by her presentation, and bring to you now the gist of it:

For this writer, rather than separate private and public life, the mother she mourned viewed these two spheres as concentric circles. Therefore the centre of one is the centre point of all. Respect for our beings is expressed in similar ways: in a world of “you’ve got it, flaunt it”, (with its corollary “If you don’t flaunt it, you don’t have “it”), covering up (among other things) raises eyebrows. Kedusha, however, striving for holiness, is the quest that defined her mother’s outlook on life. Kedusha requires boundaries- of behaviour- that set relationships apart. Boundaries that become holy.

With holiness at the core, holiness inherent and holiness as fruit of intense, diligent efforts, there are ripple effects: Circles emanate from this centre point, circles that influence society. She argues that one does not go out of the home to the outside world to achieve success, but rather, one pushes the walls of home outward so as to bring the rest of the world inside. She points out that the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed by the Romans 2000 year ago: a coin was minted by the Romans: Judea Capta. But the Romans are long gone, and yet Jews have continued to this day to live and thrive. She surmises that the Bayit Yehudi, the Jewish home, was secure. The first circle remained intact, despite incredible challenges. Through the centuries, it has been the constant foundation for building anew.

What is that core, that centrepoint?

At Sinai, God spoke to us in the singular: Kadesh Atzmekah: “sanctify yourself”. This is the first step toward the mandate “Kedushim TihiY”: you (plural) shall be holy. The core kedusha is personal. If the centre point is weak, the rest is in danger of imploding. Personal sanctity has its roots in the soul,-study, prayer, mitzvot. Personal sanctity informs how we conduct our daily life wherever we are at work, in social settings, among family, alone.

But Kedusha also means separate.

She concludes that saying Kaddish is a public prayer, a public statement, and as such it is not core, it is not centrepoint, it is not first circle, it is not central value.

She writes that God’s name is sanctified most when people bring that name into the details of their daily lives- how they do business, how they treat their neighbours, how they live the most intimate part of their lives.

The third point of interest occurred to me this past Sunday, when some of us went to the Mayfair to watch “Dancing in Jaffa”. This proved to be a slow, somewhat laborious film, based on the story of Pierre Dulaine, a Palestinian man from Jaffa, whose parents emigrated to the USA, when Israel won the war of independence, when he himself was a 4 year old boy. Monsieur Pierre endeavours to teach ballroom dancing to Israeli children, some Jewish, some Palestinian, driven as he is by his belief that a shared activity such as dancing, which incorporates a language that knows no boundaries except respectful behaviour, joy with movement in a shared rhythm, is one way to help break the barriers of hate and prejudice that separate the people of Jaffa, and of Israel and Gaza.

What is my point?

I need to draw your attention to one more notion: in the daily morning prayer of the Jewish people, there is not a whole lot of room for our neighbours, for those who inhabit the earth alongside each of us, for those who are not Jewish. Even the Shabbat siddur, whose focus is peace makes very little room for others. By that I mean that nowhere do I find what I think and feel is needed to bring about the peace that we so regularly pray for. The gap I feel is lack of empathy, lack of inclusiveness for those who suffer in the world, especially those when we think of as enemies. The film of last Sunday made that point very clearly for me, especially when it explained that the state holiday known as Independence Day in Israel is known in Palestinian quarters as the Day of Catastrophe: until last Sunday, I had not given thought to what Israeli Palestinians feel and how they perceive what is for Ottawa Jews at least, a day of rejoicing. I am not saying that Israel should change the name of the day or abolish the holiday altogether. I am saying that we need to feel and appreciate how the “other” feels, because all others are our neighbours, about whom it is said we should treat them as we wish to be treated.

Dancing is one activity which requires respect and attentiveness from and for the partner. If children of different, less than friendly backgrounds, can learn that, then indeed there may be room for peace. Dancing, however requires touching, feeling, moving in synchrony: it uses the intuitive knowledge that Rabbi Magonet referred to, the kind of knowledge that grows through relationships with others: relationships that are not only defined as them versus us, good versus bad, Jew versus Arab; rather through relationships that are defined by respect, by receptiveness and by caring, by the intent to treat the other well so that the joint activity also goes well.

Our reading today concludes (30:10 to 30:14) with these words

-The Lord will again delight in your well-being, as He did in that of your fathers, (…) once you return to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul.

Surely this Instruction which I enjoin upon you today is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth, in your heart, to observe it.-

I would say that the first step toward a relationship with others that is for and about peace might begin by a prayer for peace, from the heart, that includes all, not just us and Israel, at the very least on Shabbat morning. Leah Schnitzer added these precious words many years ago, in siddurim we rarely use now, to the Kaddish: it is my view that Adath Shalom would do well to return to this core value of inclusiveness and caring, in our hearts, in the hope that it emerges from the heart into our daily actions:

“ Ose Shalom Bimromav, who yaase shalom, alenu ve al col Israel, ve al col yoshve tevel, veyimru: amen.”