

Magen Avot 9th Anniversary Shabbos – 29 June 2024

Good Shabbos and congratulations to us all on the anniversary of our first official Shabbos morning minyan on parashas Shlach Lecho nine years ago.

“Shlach lecho anoshim” – “send out men”.

“Kulom anoshim” – “they were all men”

Rashi – “Kol anoshim sheb’mikreh loшон chashivus ...” – “wherever the Torah uses the term ‘men’ it is an expression of importance”.

At first sight this is a peculiarly inept message for our shul: a community in which from the very first day we built into our founding ethos a determination to ensure that gender stereotyping had no place within our community. Our very foundation was, in a real and practical sense, a reaction against the attempts to belittle, in the name of religion, the contribution that women of all ages play today in every aspect of the world, and which for their personal wellbeing as well as for the community’s wellbeing, they must be encouraged to bring to bear on their communal involvement.

So much is that part of who we are that the fact that the Torah appears to stress so strongly the exclusively male list of the roshei bnei Yisroel appears at first sight peculiarly contrary to the founding principles of Magen Avot.

(Of course, one can say that the word enosh means human more than it means male – but the fact remains that all the meraglim were – men!)

At second sight, however, it would be difficult to have imagined a more appropriate parashah for our first official week joining together as a fledgling community in the Hendon Hall Hotel all those years ago.

The meraglim were, indeed, all men. They were chosen because at that time the cultural norm was for men to take the lead in most matters of public endeavour. Some of us may feel that that accounts for much of what transpired later in the parashah; but be that as it may it was a simple reflection of the societal expectations of the time.

As the centuries have passed, the world in general has had opportunities to refine our ideas of what is right, what is proper and what is in the best interests of members of society and of those societies themselves. With the widespread discovery or acceptance of the notion of individual human worth just a couple of hundred years ago, a range of previously accepted forms of bigotry and discrimination have become exposed for what they always were.

Nowadays, the world is increasingly divided between those male dominated enclaves that seek to perpetuate their own prejudices and self-serving bigotry by doubling down on an outmoded and discredited cultural oppression and repression of women through the ages, and those who embrace the Divine value of the modern realisation of the importance of diversity and inclusivity in every sense within every community, religious and otherwise.

And this is not a distinction between races, between religions, or between any other formal institutional barriers. The oppression and repression of women is found as much in some parts of modern Jewish practice today as it is in the practices of some parts of most, if not all, other religions.

Our community ethos makes it very clear that as an orthodox Jewish shul we retain the distinction between male and female roles for a number of purposes of public ritual; and we do that with the combined consent of both sides of the mechitzah, proudly maintaining our religious ritual traditions. Within that traditional framework, it is a founding principle that there must be ample

opportunity to ensure that every girl, boy, woman and man feels that their individual talents and needs for expression and action are valued by and deployed within our community. That is one of the most important things Magen Avot was founded to do, and it remains of the essence of our ethos today.

When the Rambam codified Hilchos Melochim including the laws of the hereditary monarchy within Judaism building on the rabbinic pronouncement “Melech v’lo Malkah”, his words were capable of being interpreted or applied in two ways. Some have sought to extrapolate them and turn them into an excuse for the continued disenfranchisement of women in ways that have to do neither with sovereignty nor with public religious ritual.

Others, however, have taken them as an articulation of the parameters of gendered distinction within Jewish law and have built on the ample scope that they provide for change and development in accordance with social and cultural refinement through the ages.

If I may indulge in a personal reflection for one moment, many years ago as a young lawyer I was asked to join a meeting between then Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits o’h and two members of his Beis Din, to consider what changes needed to be made to the United Synagogue’s founding documents to permit women to become formal leaders within United Synagogue communities. And it is greatly to the credit of the United Synagogue, to which we proudly belong, that it has done as much as any other synagogal movement in the world to confront the prejudices of the past, at least in this respect.

Returning to the dissonance to our modern ears of the word “anoshim” for a moment, although it is a masculine word that we would not now choose to use in describing community leaders, since they come from both genders, the fundamental concept that is inherent in the emphasis on that word as expounded by Rashi is one that remains as true as ever, and is another part of

the founding and fundamental ethos of our wonderful community, in that we proudly proclaim ourselves to be “an inclusive community that is welcoming to all”.

The full nuances of this word in this respect can perhaps best be found in the famous statement of the Mishneh in Pirkei Ovos: “b’mokom she’ein ish hishtadel lihyos ish” – “in a place where nobody is behaving like an ‘ish’, try very hard to be an ‘ish’”. This aphorism is, of course, not in any sense intended to refer to man as contrasted with woman, but means and has always been taken to mean a descriptive emphasis on an individual, of either sex, who is firm in their own principles and proud of their own identity, as opposed to somebody who cannot function other than as part of a herd or flock.

Where did the meraglim go wrong in the parashah, and why is it that Moshe Rabeinu at the outset gives Yehoshuah a brochoh to be saved “me’atzas meraglim” – “from the advice of the meraglim”. What is wrong with or dangerous about advice? What is wrong with or dangerous about discussion with ones colleagues on a mission? Is it really necessary or appropriate to be like Koleiv who goes off to Hebron and isolates himself and refuses to take part in any discussion, because he’s already made up his mind? Indeed the Torah itself seems undecided whether Yehoshuah’s active engagement with the other meraglim or Koleiv’s self-imposed isolation was the more correct: the Chofetz Chayim o’h reminds us that when the Torah mentions Yehoshua and Koleiv later on it mentions sometimes the one and sometimes the other first, which the Chofetz Chayim takes as intended to clarify that the attitude of neither is to be preferred in and of itself.

Being our own person is important, and sometimes comes with an element of self-enforced detachment. Engaging with other people, including with people with whom we profoundly disagree, also has a fundamental role in Jewish thought. As I mentioned on the BBC Today Programme’s Thought for the Day

this Thursday, when the new Parliament assembles next week I will be reminding Members in my induction speech that it is the way we engage with our opponents with respect and courtesy that marks us out as individuals worthy of respect ourselves: that anyone can treat their friends with respect and affection, but that is not the mark of the Divine spirit coming out in the human.

So there is nothing wrong and much right with consulting and engaging with others: but it must be done from a basis of principle, and on our own moral and ethical terms. The Chofetz Chayim illustrates the point whimsically and graphically by reminding us that although the Rabbis make much of the arba minim as representing every kind of Jew, with every kind of merit and deficiency, the spiritually self-confident esrog – with learning and deeds founded on firm Torah principles – is not bound physically with the others: it joins them to make brochos and to participate in worship, and then it returns to its box.

I cannot discuss and debate with others how to approach a topic and a problem in a way that meets the underlying principles of my behaviour, unless I am clear what those principles are. Again, when we started this community, we articulated and published our entire ethos which remains the bedrock of our existence, including a number of components beyond inclusivity itself. You cannot include effectively if there is nothing of substance to include people in: and our inclusive community is founded unshakeably on a modernity and an orthodoxy which includes: our love for the State of Israel; our love for learning; equality of opportunity for all; commitment to our youth; and our insistence on ensuring that everybody has an opportunity to pray with devotion and commitment uninterrupted by conversations that people could just as well have outside. All the things that went to make our principles the founding backbone of this community make each of us a resolute and grounded ish – a human being who is clear about and proud of their religious and ethical values and commitments.

The meraglim failed because they kept looking over their shoulder to see what other people thought of them, and because they confused their reputation with their own notion of self-worth: as they reported to the Bnei Yisroel of their passage through the land, “we felt that we were being perceived as insects compared to giants, and that is how we appeared in the eyes of those who saw us”. That is not a council of elders: a council of elders is where people come together with their own ideas founded on principle, treat their opponents with respect, and are more than happy to modify and refine their ideas and conclusions, but never to abandon their fundamental principles.

The protection afforded by Moshe Rabeinu to Hosheah against adverse influence from his interaction with the other meraglim was to add one of the letters of God’s name at the beginning of Hosheah’s name, to form Yehoshuah: the root of Hosheah means being saved – what saves us is having our ideas and all other aspects of our lives firmly and expressly founded on an acceptance of our allegiance to the values and characteristics of Hashem, as articulated in the thirteen attributes and other relevant Biblical passages of Divine revelation. With that foundation, we can safely interact with everyone else, including our opponents, without any fear for our own spiritual safety and integrity.

If the shul will indulge me for one very brief moment on this first Shabbos after I finished saying kaddish for my dear mother o’h, I will merely note in one sentence that my father o’h and my mother o’h – who were known to many of you – were both noted for always for listening to others but never departing from their very firm principles as doctors and as human beings. This midah did not always get them liked, but they were always universally and deeply respected.

I congratulate us all on having reached this ninth anniversary: it has not always seemed certain or even likely that we would survive as long as we have. And I

have no doubt in my mind that our survival against a number of odds is in large part due to the fact that *kol hascholos kashos*, as the Gemora says, that all beginnings are difficult, and we faced the difficulties of foundation by articulating our clear principles right at the beginning, and boruch Hashem Hashim we have never wavered from those principles however difficult or challenging it has seemed.

I wish us all another year of our wonderful community where each of us brings their unique contribution as an *ish* in so many different ways, and where as a result the whole is so much greater than the sum of the parts. B'ezras Hashem Yisborach we will be zocheh to share another year of prayer, learning and chessed together, and to play our fullest part in reawakening the ruchnius of our people and through our people the whole world, ad sheyovo Melech, Goel u'Moishiah, bimheiro b'yomeinu omein v'omein.
