

### Striving for a more peaceful, quieter life

Earlier this month I woke up one morning to a nightmare of a typical suburban house owner. It was 7:30am in the morning and the gardeners had started work in our garden. So early! The mowing seemed extraordinarily loud. I started to imagine the neighbours waking up and the anger they would feel after potentially a long week at work, desperately in need of sleep – what if some of them work nights? My guilt and shame emotions were in over-drive. 7:30am, though not illegal I found out, is far too early. I had a word with the gardeners and spoke to a couple of neighbours who came to complain.

Still sitting with the guilt after the school run that morning, I decided to write a few notes to say sorry to the neighbours I had not spoken to. I started by writing notes for our cul-de-sac. Then I realised there were houses on the street behind so I walked around. On my way back I thought I should also write notes for the houses on the parallel street. An hour later, over 15 notes posted, I asked the classic rabbinic and Jewish question of myself – what is really going on? My response was clearly not about this incident but much more. Yes, the gardeners came too early, yes, some neighbours may have been woken up, but it wasn't my direct fault and it wouldn't happen again. What was really going on with my excessive apologising?

Being in the month of Elul, as it was then, the traditional month for *teshuvah*, repentance, returning and apologising, I realised that I wanted to say sorry – not only for the early morning noise – but for so much more. I, like all of us, carry around guilt like a heavy rucksack, most of the time. As I posted the notes, I was seeking forgiveness for so much – there is so much I am sorry about.

*I am sorry for the pain we experience – undergoing terminal and painful illnesses, relapses in mental health. I was saying sorry to them for the lack of support they were getting.*

*I am sorry for the state of the planet. Having followed the Extinction Rebellion movement, passing them on Deansgate, I am sorry for the world I am passing on to my child and the generations after him. I am sorry that we will be enjoying our honey this year whilst the plight of the bee, our Mancunian symbol, is precarious.*

*I am sorry for the anger and hate we have been spouting at each other since the Brexit referendum – sorry for the politicians who have suffered abuse and death threats, sorry for the toxic language and for the public who, whatever their political persuasions, have experienced fear, division and uncertainty.*

*I am sorry to our children and all of us that the wonderful technology we have means that we subject each other to abuse, that we don't hear each other, and become keyboard warriors without seeing the person behind the screen.*

*I am sorry for our pain in seeing antisemitism in a Corbyn led Labour party and the Islamophobia in the Conservative Party. I wanted to apologise to Gabriel, my son, to our children, for the argument in the house of Commons when a Sikh Labour MP stood up to chastise the Prime Minister for his comments on Muslim Women, to which Boris Johnson retorted that there was antisemitism in the Labour Party. I am sorry that our Parliament has resorted to arguing about who is more racist. I am sorry that members of our community have suffered antisemitic attacks in the street. I am sorry that some of us feel so scared that they even think of leaving Britain should the landscape change.*

*I am sorry that members of our community with disabilities struggle to get support and be afforded dignity. I am sorry that our members on Universal Credit feel scared and insecure. I am sorry that the refugees my family hosted have found it impossible to secure housing and security.*

*I am sorry that some of us have been suffering from anti-social behaviour in the city centre and are fearful of our public safety.*

*I am sorry and deeply pained to see rough sleepers on our streets. I am devastated that a rough sleeper died at the end of our Jackson's Row last year, alone and unsupported. I am so sorry.*

*I am sorry that times feel hard and scary. I am sorry.*

How much was behind my neighbourly notes of forgiveness?! You may well be saying to yourselves – she's giving herself a hard time – she's not to blame. In some ways you are right. I am not directly to blame for a lot that I am apologising for, but I am responsible. We are all responsible, in every moment. We have ultimate responsibility for our actions and behaviour. And our religion expects nothing less. As the American Rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, 'few are guilty, all are responsible.'

We can take this thought further if we look at the work of the Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. He argues, in essence, that by being human we are inextricably bound to the person next to us, our neighbours, the neighbours on the street behind us and so on and so on. We are pre-destined to ethical responsibility whether we choose to be or not. For Levinas it is in our relationship to others, seeing the face of the other, that we meet this responsibility. In standing face to face with those around us they are revealed to us and we reveal ourselves. In those moments 'being me' becomes 'being us'. Once we truly meet

others, we become responsible for them in their entirety – flaws, messiness and beauty all bundled together.

This thought – that we are ultimately responsible for each other - can be found in our Torah. Rabbi Daniel Lichman teaches this is our אִיכָּה moment - אִיכָּה is the question asked by God to Adam and Eve after they ate the apple in the Garden of Eden – אִיכָּה – where are you? – God demands.

God calls us to attention – it is a call to responsibility – where are you? Where do you stand? What are you doing? What have you done? What will you do? We have to respond, as Abraham and the prophets did, *hineni*, here I am. I am here and I am willing to take my place in relationship with others.

As I finished my walk of my neighbourhood, I realised that I desperately wanted my neighbours to open their doors. Putting a note through their doors wasn't enough. I wanted them to open their doors, as a few did, and say to them – I am sorry for what's happened to you, to us. I am here – *hineni* – you can count on me. We are in this together. I was seeking, and always seek, connection.

Sometimes this seeking, and the feeling of being responsible can be overwhelming and destructive. But it needn't be. In fact, in the face of fear, uncertainty, pain, loss, grief - connection with others, seeing them face to face and stepping up to our responsibilities can be everything – life affirming and healing.

For me, being in community, as we are, allows us to see each face to face, to do this important work, if we let the armour down. And, in acting together on social justice issues, or praying together, eating together, volunteering on the kiddush/welcoming/security rota etc, caring for one another through bereavement or illness, celebrating births, sharing grief in infertility, riding the ups and downs of the struggles and beauty we face in this world – all of this enables us to enact the responsibility we have for ourselves and each other – in seeing ourselves face to face we recognise the divine presence in and around us.

As the scholar Brene Brown says – ‘spirituality is recognising and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion.’

Connection with others, in community, fights the demons of loneliness and isolation. It fights the curse of hate and otherness – seeing people as separate and different. Community, connection and responsibility gives us life, ensures that we cannot but act for the good of the vulnerable, that we won't allow members of our community to suffer the horrors that may be dealt out to them.

We are responsible for one another. Recognising this might manifest in the smallest of ways – saying hello to a neighbour, talking to a lonely parent in the school playground, staying in the conversation when someone says something hateful – speaking your truth but taking the time to find out what is going on for them, it may be answering calls from this community for help, volunteering through our shul – for example with our work with GM Citizens on Hate Crime or the Living Wage, joining our Green Team. It could be smiling and chatting to a rough sleeper, refusing to enter into conversations or use language that divides or de-humanises. Whatever it is – when we embrace our responsibility and acknowledge that we have choices before us in every moment – our lives and the world around us will transform and the Promised Land awaits.

May we all this year post our own sorry notes and seek connection with others – see our neighbours, friends, family members, colleagues, strangers, face to face – understanding that through our differences we are bound by our common humanity. May we see ourselves in everyone we meet and, through our Judaism step up to the call and question - איפה? Where are you? And may we respond and act with the word – *hineni* – I am here. We are here together.

*Ken Yehi Ratzon* – may this be God's will. Amen.

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