

Afterword

B *echol Dor Va Dor*
Le Chol Dor Va Dor

In every generation and for every generation.

It is May 2008. Late spring, early summer. Here we are, again, in Jerusalem, in the Old City emerging from a tour of the Western Wall tunnels.

We have walked through the archaeological excavations under the famous Western Wall of the ancient Israelite Temple which King Solomon, the son of King David, originally constructed over 3,000 years ago on the rocks of Mount Moriah, where Abraham, our patriarch, had walked about 4,400 years ago.

These 488 metres of tunnels, rooms and public halls resonate with history: the Levites, Prophets, Maccabeans, Priests, Kings and people, wars, destruction, rebuilding, pain and suffering, hopes and dreams, trials and tribulations.

Life and Death.

The life of the Jewish people. The crossroads of civilisations.

Dina and I emerge into Arab East Jerusalem, a short walking distance from the Damascus (Shechem) gate. We are with our tour guide, Eldad, an Israeli, aged mid-thirties, who specialises in Middle Eastern geography, history and culture. Eldad's parents survived Nazi Europe and restarted their lives in Israel, where he was born, educated and served in the Israeli Army.

We feel secure and happy. The narrow alleyways are abuzz with Arabic people, young and old, men, women and children. Life and trade are brisk on the streets. Open markets. A few beggars. The muezzin's shrill, singing voice

resounds through loudspeakers, echoing off the stone walls, calling the people to prayer; the sounds and smells and flashes of colour from clothes hanging on string lines stretched between windows above, dance in the breeze.

There in front of us in the souk are fresh pastries and Middle Eastern delicacies made of semolina, sesame seeds, dates, nuts, honey and sweet syrups. We stop to buy a selection. “*Shukran*” (thank you) we smiled. “*Salam Alaikum*” (peace be upon you, or hello to you) was proffered, to which we responded “*Alaikum Salam*” (to you – peace or thanks, hello to you also).

People – feelings – culture – history and survival. Honour and self-esteem. Respect towards others and respect for one’s self. Eldad speaks some Arabic. He is very concerned about the plight of the Arabic populations in general. We have already spent some days together touring Israel with our family. There has been a heated discussion with one of my sons-in-law who objected to Eldad’s blaming of Israel for the misfortunes of the Palestinians. Eldad believes that we Jews should have done more and should be doing much more to help them. Eldad feels that Israel is at fault.

As we emerge from the Old City through the Damascus Gate, we stand by the steps waiting for our minibus driver to pick us up. We give most of our pastries to the Arabic children milling around us.

We are waiting in the sun.

I ask Eldad why he blames “us” for “their” problems. We talk. It is a friendly and positive discussion. I point out to Eldad that we Jews seem to expect perfection from ourselves. I say that this is most probably a very good thing. We are human beings. We are not perfect. All human beings make mistakes, but, maybe, it is a good thing for us Jews to aim high, to expect perfection and to punish ourselves (feel bad and seek to improve) when things go wrong.

Eldad approves of my thinking. We had taken him with us when we visited certain charity projects which our family has been actively supporting for many years. Eldad had not previously been exposed to Jewish problems – orphans, battered women and children, soup kitchens for the underprivileged and new immigrant absorption centres.

I remind Eldad that his own parents had suffered from persecution. Persecution for being Jewish, nothing else. They most probably had a lot to

hate but had not allowed hatred nor politics to trap them into being lifelong refugees. They had started new lives. They had worked and built and created. They had tried to escape from their own sufferings to provide a better future for their children, for Eldad.

As much as there are many wrongs in the world, we can only try our best within our resources and possibilities to make the world a better place. Modern Israel is only 60 years old. It has absorbed millions of refugees from all over the world in its short, independent, democratic nationhood. It started with rocks, sand, malaria-infested swamps, little water and hostile neighbours. It was forced to fight many battles and wars which were imposed upon little Israel and Israel had to defend itself against the open threat of destruction. Even if there is suspicion of an injured or killed civilian Arab, most Israelis feel saddened by such casualties and often grieve for their surviving families. Unfortunately, the reverse is not the case. Many Palestinians take to the streets, celebrating in public joy and ecstasy when their brother and sister terrorists succeed in maiming or killing innocent Israeli women and children.

I say to Eldad that there is a fundamental difference. Most of us try to move forward with our lives and to build a better future. What do we expect of ourselves? Israel is only about one-third the size of Tasmania – the smallest state in Australia. Israel is about 800 kilometres long (like from Melbourne to Canberra, about two-thirds of the way to Sydney) and 20 to 50 kilometres wide in its most populated area to 100 kilometres wide across the desert. It has only about 6 million in population and no natural resources.

There are over 100 million Arabs with massive oil and gas resources and a vast amount of land that could easily help solve the poverty and social problems of their coreligionists, rather than waste massive amounts of money funding terrorism.

When Israel became independent in 1948 about 400,000 Arabs fled to neighbouring Arab countries, although many stayed and continue to be Israeli citizens. At the time, the Arab League inflated the “official” figures for political manipulation by about 150,000 people according to the United Nations. The estimated total population of Palestine under Ottoman Turkish rule in the

mid-nineteenth century was only about 300,000 people. There was general immigration into the region under the British Mandate in the first half of the twentieth century. These 400,000 or so people became refugees in their Arab host countries, which many of them and their descendants continue to be. However, more than 650,000 Jews who had lived in the world's twenty-two Moslem countries (excluding but a few), most for many generations, many families for over a thousand years, as good citizens and neighbours, became refugees and were mainly absorbed into Israel, without compensation for their losses.

I am not saying that there is any moral equivalence. A wrong is not righted by another wrong. I am saying that at least we Jews do try to do the right thing and do try to help others. But! We first need to try to help ourselves as no one else is out there helping us. We are not trying to kill, destroy or colonise/occupy our neighbours. We do try to live peacefully within our neighbourhood and to care for it and our neighbours.

Unfortunately, many of our neighbours hate us and constantly threaten us.

Who is focused upon annihilating whom?

Who is dreaming about peaceful coexistence?

Thus, we must first look after ourselves and use the major part of our limited resources for our own people – for our own survival. We have many problems of our own and many of our own people with serious problems. Our first priority must be to help our own people. Only then can we afford to help others as we do help others all the time.

Just look at the humanitarian aid which Israel sends into Gaza every day and often in the face of rocket attacks, bombs and shooting. The poor people living in Sderot who are under constant rocket attack are the victims, not the aggressors.

Eldad agrees. I ask him what he thinks are the necessary human values in any society to make it sustainable. He thinks for a moment and then says that people have to be good people.

“Yes,” I reply, “but what is ‘goodness’ in people? What is the value system?”

Eldad thinks on this and explains that people need to live by ethics and

morality. They need peace. To feel it. To feel peace themselves and be peaceful. To be gracious, kind and compassionate to other people. They need to be fair and to be helpful or charitable to others around them.

“In other words,” I ask him, “to treat others as they would like others to treat them?”

“Yes,” he responds. “Much like that.”

So I say that I fully agree with him. This was what our famous Sage, Rabbi Hillel, had said about 2,000 years ago. Hillel said that this was the basis of living life – it is the basis of Torah. To do unto others as you would have them do unto you and not to do unto others as you would not wish them to do to you.

How can people and society develop these values?

Only by education. It starts in the home by the parents to their children leading by example, investing time and value into showing and teaching children right from wrong.

The first and most important lesson is “no”. There are limits and boundaries. There are laws and restrictions. “No” is such an important part of the most basic human behaviour.

The next and equally important lesson is about sharing and consideration of others, such as sitting at the table even though the child is not eating or has finished eating, just because it is nice and proper and the right thing to do out of respect for the others present who are still eating.

This is the opposite of the egocentric modern world.

The “me, myself”, the “you” and the “us”.

What follows is “the today”, “the tomorrow” and “the day after tomorrow,” rather than “the here and the now for myself”. The importance of the impact of the individual upon society as well as the impact of society upon the individual.

These values differentiate humans from the animal kingdom and make for sustainable lifestyles within sustainable societies.

⁵³ A prayer recited on the eve of *Yom Kippur* asking for the annulment of vows to God and forgiveness for transgressions.

Eldad stands and looks at me with a gentle smile on his handsome face. We wait for our minibus to arrive.

“I have enjoyed meeting you and your family,” he tells me. “I have never met a family like yours and I have learnt so much during our time together. My family was not religious and we also were not so close,” he says. “You are religious and maybe some of you are not so religious, but you are so close and also know so much about Israel and life. Before I met you, I thought I understood a lot and now I have seen so many new things. I want to thank you,” he says.

“Thank you, too,” I reply. “We have also learnt a lot from you.”

Dina is enjoying the discussion as she stands with us in the sun, observing the people all around us. Eldad then turns to her and asks Dina what she thinks is the most important quality of people within a society. How did she, as a mother and grandmother, feel about raising a family in today’s world and what was important?

Dina gently responds immediately. “You have to be a *mensch*.” I smile to myself. Not bad for my “Sephardi princess”, expressing herself with a word in the Yiddish language. “What is a *mensch*?” asks Eldad. Dina replies, “A good person. A decent, honest, moral, considerate and well-behaved person.”

Eldad agrees. In fact, he says, that this is what he has said to me just before.

So we all agree. A society is generally civil when its people are good human beings. The person makes for the society as the society influences its people.

I then ask Eldad: “Tell me, you are not a religious person, are you?”

“No,” he replies, “you already know that I don’t believe in religion. Religion causes too many problems and conflicts in the world!”

“What do you do on *Yom Kippur*?” I ask.

“Of course, I fast,” Eldad responds, “and, sometimes I might just visit a synagogue for a short while to catch up with friends.”

“Tell me,” I continue, “do you know how the Kol Nidrei⁵³ evening service starts on *Yom Kippur*?”

“What do you mean?” asks Eldad.

“I mean, what is the most important Jewish principle which is emphasised right at the beginning of *Yom Kippur*? The core issue which every Jew must struggle with?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” responds Eldad. “Everyone knows that *Yom Kippur* is all about begging G-d for forgiveness of sins.”

“Is that so,” I start to press him. “Do you really believe that *Yom Kippur* is as easy as that?”

“Well, I’m not religious and I don’t believe in G-d,” Eldad exclaims. “I told you, if there was a G-d, He would run the world differently. People would not have to suffer. There would not be wars, no diseases, no extreme poverty nor injustice!”

“You are 100 per cent correct,” I say softly, “but according to you, there is no G-d and the world is a rotten place. Now, tell me please, let’s get back to my question about *Yom Kippur*?”

Eldad looks at me, then at Dina and then at me again. “What do you mean?” he asks.

“I’ll explain this to you,” I offer. “You see, every person who is preparing themselves to enter that truly awesome day of *Yom Kippur*, before they feel their first tears of fear, trepidation and guilt as the Kol Nidrei prayer starts, must first have made peace between themselves and their fellow human being.

“*Beyn Adam Le Chavero* (between people) comes before *Beyn Adam Le Makom* (between a person and G-d). G-d is not interested in us asking Him for forgiveness of anything if we have not first sought the forgiveness of our fellow human beings, whom we have sinned against, Eldad, or ‘wronged’ if you prefer that word to the connotation of the word ‘sin’. So, you see that there is actually no difference between your world and my world. We both live in the same world. It is the people who are causing all of the problems, not G-d and it is the people who can and should solve all of these problems, because these are people problems.

“The only difference between us is that I have a solid reference point. A set of absolute rules and regulations which I believe are G-d-given and inviolate. I don’t have inner conflicts about this framework, although I do have conflicts and problems. For me, these are no more than my daily human

struggle between my *yetzer ha-ra* and my *yetzer ha-tov*. I am lucky. You are less lucky because your conflicts are not only the same as my conflicts, but you have even greater conflicts to contend with, because you don't start with a fixed framework. You and everyone else like you are searching for and trying to rationalise your own individual frameworks."

We both agree; in fact the vast majority of humanity agrees that people should be "good" and that "ethics and morality" are essential in sustainable societies. The problem is only that every individual in Eldad's kind of society chooses or needs to choose their own definitions, interpretations, rationalisations and rules and regulations. In my kind of society, we only need to try to behave accordingly.

Thus on one hand, there is no real difference between "good" and "bad" in a religiously believing or non-believing person. Both can be either "good" or "bad". On the other hand, there should not be conflicts about what constitutes "good" and "bad" from a G-dly-orientated perspective.

A human's fundamental shortcoming is egocentricity. When we place ourselves at the centre of the universe, there are simply too many centres of too many artificial universes, and society becomes unsustainable.

In a G-d-centred universe, we don't anymore have the "me, myself and now" attitude to life. A very selfish philosophy! Instead, we have a "you, us, tomorrow as well as today and, even more importantly, the day after tomorrow" approach to living life.

"The no and the yes." "The we and the us." Where the "me" is much more part of the "you" than trying to make the "you" part of "me". One world, one universe, but, two diametrically opposing philosophies of life.

We all become silent. We feel a kind of personal serenity – a release and relief. It is peaceful.

Our minibus drives up and we greet our driver as we climb aboard. "You know what," I continue saying to Eldad. "I think that the key words which you would write down to try to define goodness in humanity would be righteousness, justice, kindness (loving-kindness), mercy (compassion) and fidelity (faithfulness)." (*Tzedek, Mishpat, Chesed, Rachamim, Emunah.*)

"Yes", he agrees, "let me think on this some more, please."

“Why not?” I say with a smile, “but do you know where these words were written a very, very long time ago? In the *Tanach* according to the prophet Hosea.⁵⁴ Funny coincidence!” I continue. “This is actually read as the *Haphtarab*⁵⁵ of the weekly Torah portion of *Parashat Bamidbar*,⁵⁶ you know, so there you have it.” We all go on living our lives day to day and minute by minute. We all encounter the inner conflicts which life challenges us with. We question. We live. We try to survive. We enjoy the many little joys which life brings. In fact, every morning when we put on our *tephillin*⁵⁷ before morning prayers (*Shacharit*) we repeat precisely these five words as we bind our *tephillin* strap three times over the middle finger of our passive hand, both as a renewed covenant with G-d, as well as a reminder to ourselves.

Bechol Dor Va Dor – in every generation people need to experience their own experiences and in so doing, re-experience previous experiences of others. Rather than choosing to try to re-create or reinvent the wheel, it is easier and more beneficial to try to re-experience the revelation which took place at Mt Sinai.

This provides the sustainability – *Bechol Dor Va Dor* for *Le Chol Dor Va Dor*, within each generation as its legacy for each successive generation.

Ageing.

Belief and bureaucracy.

Continuity.

Behaviour.

Water, life and numbers.

Happiness.

Science or religion and religion or science.

⁵⁴ Hosea Chapter 2, Verses 21 & 22

⁵⁵ A section from the Prophets chanted during Sabbath services and festivals.

⁵⁶ Bamidbar – this is the first chapter of the Fourth Book of Moses. It mainly deals with the Census of the Children of Israel as Israel becomes a free nation. A Holy Nation – “A light unto the world!”

⁵⁷ A set of phylacteries.

I suppose that the fundamental question is “how?”

Life is relevant in each time and in each place. We can only try to imagine our own re-experience of the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation of Torah on Mt Sinai, but, our experience is impacting us in the here and the now, not the past.

This is the “magic” of the relevance of Torah in every generation. Torah is the present which connects us to the past and guarantees the future.

The beauty of the interaction of the Oral Law with the Written Law is that, through *Halachah*, it applies to the todays and continues to be consistent and relevant to the tomorrows.

Judaism, as life, did not get stuck in a particular time in history at a particular geographical location. Yes, we have our traditions and, yes, we love and respect our patriarchs, but, no, we don't live in the past. We live in the present. We survive the “here and the now”. Our lives must be relevant to the times and we cannot try to hide from the truth. This ensures our future.

Torah is truth (the *emet*).

I heard a cute story about evolution. In a literal sense, an “evolutionist” should have more respect for his children and grandchildren than for his parents and grandparents. This is because he believes in evolutionary improvement of his species. The link to the past is to some genetically lower species as the genetic path is towards perfection in the future. Conversely, a G-d-believing person views perfection in the past, in G-d's creations and thus time moves us further away from perfection.

Similarly, an egocentric view of life sees “the ultimate person” in themselves in the here and the now.

Interesting! There is much “good” in the past, the present and the future. There is also “bad”. The only perfection is in G-d. Humans are imperfect. Humans have the potential to change.

Ancient Egypt philosophised on these issues and attributed good and evil to external, supernatural forces of personality, motivation and dynamics, as did the ancient Greeks later in history (e.g. Eos, Isis, Osiris, Horus, Demeter, Hathor etc.)

This conflict between “good” and “evil”, “right” and “wrong” is ageless.

It is the individual conflict of every person as they live their lives in every age, in every time, in every culture and in every generation.

In today's world, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, civilisation is hotly debating the moral and ethical issues relevant to modern medicine. Questions about definitions of life and death. Stem cells, abortions, organ transplants, quality of life, in-vitro fertilisation, pre-implant genetic diagnosis, degenerative diseases – the lists and the issues go on. It is interesting to note the many differences in approaches and attitudes as well as the pressure groups and the dogmas which are being imposed onto the debates. Monotheistic religions tend to cherish life, albeit with conflicting definitions and approaches. Secular ethics tend to value autonomy and individualism as over-riding principles. The outcomes affecting the population vary according to political decisions which impact upon laws and standards. Yet, in the Jewish world, a *Halachic* one based upon many scholarly opinions and disputations, there is an overwhelming consensus in this area. There are two very significant differences in the Jewish approach to dealing with these very sensitive issues. The first is that the definitions of the critical parameters can be *Halachically* derived to be consistent. The second is that the *Halachic* approach is one of looking at each individual situation and then facilitating an appropriate outcome, in contradistinction to all other approaches, which are to apply the rules and regulations to any general case.

For modern civilisation to remain sustainable, its morals and ethics must be consistent and relevant to the times. These principles of life must speak/call to each individual rather than be relegated to personal redefinition. My point is clear. We each have the free choice to do or not to do, to learn, question and try to understand the relevance of morals and ethics to ourselves, our lives and our society at large and then to apply them to the contemporary issues and challenges facing our world. We do not really have the free choice of trying to create our own individual charters of morals and ethics, even though we surely feel that we may possess that flexibility.

Egocentricity! Personal rights!

Deus-centricity (G-d centred). Personal responsibilities.

Rights, responsibilities, obligations and outcomes.

The me, myself, so what?

Humans do not make the rules and regulations of life. The Creator of all life made these rules. We apply or fail to apply the rules for our own benefit, detriment or destruction. We can only try to fool ourselves for so long. The consequences are visible all around us.

We are commanded to “love our G-d”. How can anybody love someone whom they have never met and thus do not have a relationship with? Sounds incongruous. Feels sensible.

One practical way is to appreciate the physicality of the world and to respect it. To learn to love the creations which the Creator created. Through this awareness, one can gain greater appreciation and a relationship actually commences. Such a relationship can grow into true love and such love can be experienced as a very wholesome and fulfilling intellectual/spiritual, lasting relationship.

I have often been perplexed by one of our fundamental and most beautiful blessings. It is the *Barchu*. Literally, in Hebrew, it goes like this: *Barchu et Ha-Shem Hamevorach*. Loosely translated: Blessed be the G-d (i.e. the name of G-d) the One who is blessed (i.e. the source of blessings. *Baruch Kevod Ha-Shem, Mimkomo* – Blessed is the Glory of *Ha-Shem* from His place).

My problem is more a grammatical one, with the word “*et*”, which seems to me to be superfluous in the literal context. A simple reading would have been *Barchu Ha-Shem Hamevorach* (Let us bless G-d, the Blessed One).

Only recently did I start to feel the importance of the inclusion of the “*et*” within the context of blessing the creations which G-d created and He blesses. You may recall my mention of the Kabbalistic allusion to the “*et*” in the first seven words of Genesis in the Science and Religion chapter of this book. The Kabbalists interpret the “*et*” there as the *Aleph to Tuph*, i.e. first letter of the Hebrew alphabet through to its last letter. (The basic building blocks of creation.)

Isn't this beautiful here too?

“Blessed be the *Aleph Tuph* (i.e. physical creations) which G-d the One who is the source of blessings, created.”

Me, myself, so what?

Who am I? Where did I come from?

What kind of a life am I living?

Where am I going?

What impact am I making on others around me and on the world?

Bechol Dor Va Dor

In every generation

Beyn Adam Le Chavero

Between humans

Beyn Adam Le Makom

Between a human being and G-d

Le Chol Dor Va Dor.

For every generation.

Righteousness, justice, kindness, mercy and fidelity.

Who makes the rules?

Who defines the definitions?

The evil inclination and the good inclination.

The G-dly spark in the soul of every living person.

Searching ... Connecting ... Living.

The journey through life rather than the destination.