**Yizkor Drasha 5779, 2018**

**Every Breath You Take – ובחרת בחיים**

**Rabbi Ralph Genende**

One of the things that really struck me a few months ago as the world watched and agonised over the twelve Thai boys and their coach caught in the watery depths of that cave, was the preciousness of every breath we breathe. It reminded me of the daily Tefillah אלהי נשמה שנתת לי טהורה “My God, the soul You placed in me, it is pure – You created it, You formed it, You breathed it into me.” I’ve always loved that phrase: “You breathed it into me,” because it conjures up one of the most evocative moments of the Creation story – God pouring vital life into the mouth of Adam; and also because it reminds us how the delicate translucence of breath is the wonder of life.

It was breath that was so cunning and so frightening in this tale of darkness: the diminishing quality and quantity of oxygen in the cave, the oxygen tanks carried so precariously through the intestinal passages to the boys, the breathing apparatus places so strategically along their escape route, the irony and tragic paradox of the Saman Gunam, who lost his own air supply while laying oxygen tanks; the air-borne bugs that attacked the lungs of some of the boys.

We get 20,000 breaths every single day. A gift, but not a guarantee, a right, but not a warranty. The world may endure forever, but, as we say in our prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, “We are like a broken shard, like grass dried up, a fleeting shadow, a passing cloud, a breath of wind, a handful of dust, a dream that slips away.” There may be an awesome eternity to the universe but there’s a brutal brevity to life. And at this Yizkor time, who doesn’t have thoughts of how fragile and unpredictable life is: an awful illness, a friend taken too soon, a child who just won’t speak to you… what a tenuous thread separates life from death.

One of the most heart-breaking moments in Shakespeare’s King Lear is when the aged King holds in his arms the dead body of his beloved daughter Cordelia, the one, who he only now realizes has always stood by him. There burst from him a cri de Coeur – a cry from the heart: “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, and you no breath at all?”

On Yom Kippur we think a lot about our mortality, the fact that life is lived towards death, that our days are limited. We don’t know how long we will live, but life almost invariably seams just too short… too little, too late. Maybe this one of the reasons why we read that curious fishy tale of Jonah and the whale on this sacred day (this afternoon). Jonah is a man haunted by the transience of life. At the beginning of the story he just wanted to be left alone in his home near Jaffa. He was happy living there – he surely loved its restaurants and cobbled streets, its sea views and warm soft beaches. He just wanted to live and let live and not be bothered by dangerous missions and thoughts of death.

So when God came to him with the proposal to leave his community and travel to the seat of his enemies in Ninveh, probably today’s Mosul, he did what you and I would probably do – got onto the first boat and tried to escape to a destination holiday in Tarshish/Lebanon. After all, would you want to leave T.A. and its excellent coffee in a desperate mission to convert Baghdad, Damascus or Teheran to peace?

But God and life often have other plans for us. “Man proposes, God disposes”. Who would willingly choose the tzorres, the curved ball, that life inevitably throws at us?

As Jonah learns early on his journey, life isn’t a pleasure cruise but a storm you don’t see coming. It shakes you up, it challenges and threatens. As Katherine Hepburn famously put it: “Life is hard, after all it kills you.”

Still, Jonah evades the obvious: in the middle of the storm, to the captain’s amazement, Jonah is shloofing: “How can you sleep so soundly? Arise, call your God.” Sometimes the greater the turmoil and chaos around and within us, the more we deny reality, try to pretend we’re ok.

Yet for all this, there’s a little spark, a “nitzutz”, within the human soul, an inner-voice that will not let us sleep, that will waken us from our stupor. Every Jew, says the Baal Shem Tov, is a letter in the Torah scroll of the Jewish people, we just have to discover and recognise our unique letter. Recognise and then decide “What is your plan to do with your one wild and precious life.” (Mary Oliver)

And so Jonah acknowledges עברי אנכי – I’m a Hebrew, I’m a Jew, and I can’t deny where I come from. Like many of us who are drawn to shule just this one day; there’s a spark of recognition that surely goes beyond the sense of obligation, networking or habit. It is a way of reconnecting to community, sitting in the seats where your family sat, feeling the presence of your loved ones and those no longer here… It’s also the power of fasting and lifting voices together. For some, these 25 hours may be a case of “The God you don’t believe in is sitting right next to you…”

It’s about being true to your own self, a way of touching base, with your spiritual core, a rejuvenation and re-Jewvenation:

כלנו כאחד באור פניך

For at least one day we’re united, we’re together, we’re proud card-holding members of the Jewish people. So כל הכבוד to each and every one of you for being here and saying like Jonah עברי אנכי, I’m a Jew…

Jonah’s story of course doesn’t end with this epiphany, the moment of recognition. In fact, it’s short lived. He asks to be thrown into the stormy seas – “just get rid of me… bury my soul…” He’s caught in a limbo state, afraid to embrace his destiny and unable to let go of his demons. For the Talmud Jonah simply can’t rid himself of the raging waters of pleasure, lust and addiction. He wants to be swallowed up by the whale, converted into an amphibian, an animal free from conscience and choice.

Paradoxically, it’s at this very point that he finally encounters God. “From the belly of hell, I cried out,” he declares. Only when we reach rock bottom, when we can no longer move downwards can we begin to ascend, to move upwards. Only at this point do we really grasp the call to embrace life: “I place before you life and death. Choose life ובחרת בחיים.”

So Jonah is spat out into Ninveh to carry out his mission, to transform the city and its inhabitants. He is highly successful but still dissatisfied. As he sits under the fast growing tree God has provided for his protection from the hot sun, he is happy, but when it shrivels in the morning he’s full of angst and kvetches. Astonishingly he can’t cope with his success, it fills him with righteous rage and God has to teach him one final lesson: You cared more about the plant that provided you shade, but don’t you get it… you didn’t work for it… And you don’t want me to care about the great city of Ninveh and everything that lives in it? God cares for all humanity. God also cares about the environment and all its creatures and so should we.

Sometimes like Jonah, we do our best to escape the challenge of greatness, of doing good, of rising to our best selves. We run to Tarshish, Bali, Port Douglas, Mykonos while Ninveh is tottering - and our environment imploding. Jonah was summoned to greatness; he was even sent a cruisy whale to take him there, but he is resentful and after discharging his duty just wants to get away again and sit forever under a cool umbrella tree….

The sailors on his ship became believers, a city and its king transform themselves; a tree grows to protect him and dies overnight. Everything and everyone changed – including God who changed His decree, but the Prophet did not change. Jonah would not cast off his old shell.

As polymath, John Gardner puts it, we employ an enormous variety of clever devices to run away from ourselves. “We fill ourselves with so many diversions, involve ourselves with so many people, keep ourselves so busy that we never have time to probe the fearful and wonderful world within.”

We simply don’t achieve what we’re capable of. Life summons us all to fulfil our destinies to be captains of our destiny, not drifters; not just to be marked by life, but to leave our mark.

The call of Yom Kippur is to strive for greatness but also to accept the things you cannot change and to find the wisdom, courage and resilience to recognize those you can. It’s also about going on because you have no choice but to go on. One family who recently responded affirmatively to this call was the family of Mary Laffner. 60 year old Mary suffered a massive stroke just a few weeks ago. It left her family reeling… as she lay in the Alfred Hospital, breathing through a ventilator, they gathered their broken selves and with a steely determination did all they could to fulfil her request that her organs be donated to save other lives. Her husband, Irving, and family wanted this done in a Halachikally acceptable way though they are not particularly frum.

I was blown away by their determination and resilience, the way they somehow found the strength, resoluteness and clarity in the middle of their acute pain to ensure that Mary’s wish was fulfilled. I was in awe of how Mary acting like her Hebrew namesake Miriam, the nurturer and sustainer of the Jewish people in the wilderness, was now giving the gift of life, of breath, health and eyesight to several other human beings.

A week later I was bowled over again to get the following text from a member of our community:

*“Dear R. Ralph*

*Until I was faced with end stage kidney disease I was totally ignorant about the significance of dialysis on a patient’s life. Several times each week I attend a dialysis clinic in Malvern with 20 other patients of whom at least half are Jewish. Together we spend several hours dialysing and individually we suffer the side effects of nausea, tiredness, cramps and others, with the knowledge that either dialysis or a successful kidney transplant are required to keep us alive.*

*I cried when I read your story about Mary and her family’s generosity. And thank them from the bottom of my heart...”*

And I thank them for their kindness in allowing their story to be shared and publicised.

We read the story of Jonah on this day, as R Soloveichik asserts, lest we see our separateness and distinctiveness as a license for callous indifference to other people. Can we sleep soundly while others suffer? The Haftorah enlarges our scope for compassion and reminds us it applies even to non-Jews, even those hostile towards us like the people of Ninveh, like the Syrians today that Israel helps especially in its hospitals. So we say to those emboldened racists and anti-Semites from Jeremy Corban to Charlotsville, from Sweden to the BDS protesters in Australia, that we are not afraid, that we’re here to stay, that we’re teaching our kids and they’re reminding us, that we are here to contribute to humanity even if it’s not always to our benefit. We will shine the אור לגויים into the blackest of places because we believe that it’s never too late, my friends to build a better world to help feed the hungry and support the displaced. That we will always choose life ובחרת בחיים.

And Israel, often despite its enemies and sometimes its own leaders, continues to choose life, to punch above its weight, to change the face of technology from Soda Stream to Wayz. May it also not lose its way and continue to be the beacon of democracy and an open and civil society in the Middle East and remain one of the “10 happiest places” in the world to live.

You may not be able to see what I’m holding in my hand – it’s an old fashioned cotton reel. It’s made of wood and the twine is khaki colour because it was an army issue from World War 2.

It belonged to my father-in-law, Caron’s dad Zelik Bedell, Zelik was a man who knew how to sew, he was also a master craftsman and a soldier who fought in North Africa and Italy. He brought this reel back with him from the battlefields. He was a tough, principled man, finely honed by the trials of a long and eventful life.

This little reel reminds me of what we’re capable of achieving, of the strength that we possess of our capacity for survival and of the threads and twines that connect us to one another, our Jewish community and the wider global society.

It reminds me of a time when the world was caught sleeping by the rise of populism, anti-Semitism and hatred. Let us ensure that we are not caught napping when God comes calling, that we choose light, life and renewal. ובחרת חיים

As I watched Mary’s breath ebbing away on that artificial ventilator, I thought of all those I had known and watched as their lungs filled with their very last breaths. I thought of the boys in the cave and my Dad on his respirator, my friends and family members, congregants and strangers letting go as they moved into that good night.

Finally I thought of Marcus Aurelius’s words: “When you get up in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive, to breathe, to think, to enjoy, to love…" I thanked God with a strong and determined שהחיינו and a loving, passionate מודה אני. ובחרת בחיים I choose life

**ANNOUNCEMENT**

At Caulfield Shule we work long and hard all year round to promote our ethos of inclusion, of Modern Orthodoxy and its passion for Jewish education and prayer alongside social action.

תורה עבודה גמ"ח

We do an enormous amount – and always something happening.

We’ve got so much we can do.

We’ve got great dreams for growing our shule even more and extending our physical centre.

But we also just want to keep on running our many events, groups, activities. Many of you give all year round and we do nudge you!

But we’re doing it because we believe it gives you and your families a richer, better Jewish experience.

That’s why we keep on coming back and asking you to be part of the change we continue to create be it our:

* Darchei Shalom Soup n’ Chat down the road
* Our new youth program Zusha
* Hineni Youth group
* Mum’s n’ Bubs
* Shmoozeday
* Our regular shiurim
* Shofar in the park
* Scholars in residence

We’ve got so much more we can do for you, your kids, your grandkids.

At Caulfield Shule we’re building for tomorrow, engaging tomorrow’s generation. So please help us help you by making a small or large donation on your cards.