

Good yontef.

Shira Hadasha literally means a new song. And while that is also a metaphor for doing things a little differently, singing to a new tune perhaps, it is very much the case that actual singing - new and old songs is central to the life of this shule. Here, as in many shuls, the evocative power of music is a huge part of tfila especially at this time of year and we cherish the wordless nigun as we did moments ago, the beauty of voices joining together in the choir and the poetry of the liturgy: established prayer as well as of newer songs in Yiddish, Hebrew and English.

A song I've heard many times this year is by Regina Spektor, a Russian/American/Jewish songwriter who wrote the song "You've got time" especially for OITNB a TV series set in a women's prison that looks at a huge contemporary issue in the US – the extraordinarily high numbers of people in prisons, the over use and the failure of prison system and explores these against the back stories of the women, and the circumstances of their lives that led them to prison.

Think of all the roads

Think of all their crossings

Taking steps is easy

Standing still is hard

So perhaps it's the context of judgment and punishment. Or the way in which the main character of the series challenges our idea of what is evil, criminal. Or maybe the ideas played out in the series of how so much of what happens to people is the result of the circumstances of birth.

But whatever the reason, for me this song evokes the yamim noraim.

And these words especially: "Taking steps is easy, standing still is hard" capture a beautiful theme of the yamim noraim, the play between on one side: contemplation and reflection, and on the other: movement and change.

The parshayot we read the Shabbat before Rosh Hashana and then the Shabbat before Yom Kippur are called Nitzavim and Vayelech.

Nitzavim means standing - the people are instructed to stand - and in contrast with the standing of Nitzavim, Vayeilach means "go" and represents movement.

For transformation, for the process of change and renewal both elements are necessary: we need contemplation, reflection and also the steadfastness evoked by the idea of standing - and certainly we literally stand a lot on Yom Kippur - but of course we also need action, traction, movement if we are to change the way we live and behave.

And these next 24 hours certainly provide the time and the form for reflection, and in this shule, the sound track to accompany that.

And the contemplation is not necessarily easy – the themes and melodies of this day take us to dark places. We are told as children that Yom Kippur is solemn rather than sad – perhaps another lie told to children - but for me as an adult , and especially since coming to this shule, Yom Kippur also has an ache; it has become a moment to feel the hardest truths about being alive, and here in the heart of suburban Caulfield, in this ... bridge club, we are beckoned on Yom Kippur by voices of angels to see precariousness, how heartbreakingly easily our lives can be thrown up in the air, and all the while those voices tell us also to hold onto the beauty of living fully, whatever that means to each of us.

So standing still in the Yom Kippur moment is also surrender, an attempt to make peace with our mortality.

And that stillness stands in deep contrast to almost all the days of the year, when we walk and run through life with a determination to rage against the dying of the light, an insistence on living and living well.

Just days ago we read in the Torah, in parshat Nitzavim: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. You shall choose life – uvecharta chayim - and we do choose life and all its enterprise. We are in constant and ongoing battle to control our physical environment, we build political and social order to ward off the chaos, we fight illness and aging in any way we can, and we create: children, families, careers, communities – and necessarily to do so, we also turn away from and deny death – but today we stand still and we face into our frailty and our mortality.

The liturgy doesn't mince words. Adam yesodo mei'afar ve sofo be afar. People come from dust and end in dust. The words grab us and hold us still, even as they wound us.

Like mourners, we don't wear leather, we don't bathe or perfume ourselves, no physical love on this day. But in truth we are more than mourners - we rehearse death on this day. We don't eat or drink, and we clothe ourselves in white – rags of light and purity, it's true but also evoking the shroud of burial.

And we stand.

And this standing it is not always an easy thing. Standing still *is* hard.

And there is another dimension to this play between taking steps and standing still in the days leading up to Yom Kippur.

In these days the contrasting themes of surrender and action present themselves to us as different responses not only to the knowledge that everything that lives, must die - which has its own coherence at least - but to the frequent experience of the universe as chaotic, unfair and unjust. Nature is unpredictable and cruel, suffering is random. In the understated beauty of the language of Ecclesiastes, it's a "hevel" a frustration that our experience of life that goodness is often punished and evil is rewarded.

One response in Jewish tradition to this experience of our insignificance, of God's indifference is resignation. It's a view that we can't understand God's designs which can only be met with awe, acceptance and humility – that we just can't understand the majesty of God's intentions for the world.

And if that's what standing still means today then standing still is hard, too hard for me anyway.

When terrible things happen in our lives, when we or people we love are felled by illness or accident, when we or people we love aren't thriving, are struggling with circumstances, with trauma, loss – it doesn't cut it to just accept that this is God's will.

The voices that are most compelling to me in Jewish texts and practices are those that offer instead a belief in the adequacy of people; that offer the idea of people as partners with God, able and responsible to exercise creativity and to use intelligence with decency and dignity.

Because as much as there is cause for despair in what people do to each other, there is also real power in human endeavour – in politics, in science, in art, in the healing therapies and so much power and potency in friendship, empathy and kindness.

And in the power that love has to dance us through the panic till we're slowly gathered in.

It's not just the practical effect of people's actions that we respond to; we are moved also by the sense that there is something bigger, something holy in the potential of people to change things, to help, to fix.

Judaism offers us a way of seeing the world that is honest about God's absence, honest that sometimes bad things just happen, aren't necessarily deserved and that it doesn't help to look for reasons but at the same time opens us to the possibility of the divine spark that we experience when people step in and step up.

I'm not saying that it's always easy to call on that or that it's always helpful or even convincing, of course it's not – our experience of pain, helplessness, fear easily overwhelm us, and I'm certainly not saying that this view, this particularly Jewish conception of people in partnership with God is the only way to keep living in the face of suffering and chaos.

But our tradition offers a promise of the divine in relationship with humanity that allows us, requires us, to question and grapple with God's hiddenness and to answer the question with human action.

A very beautiful and moving description of that tradition is offered in a text I referred to earlier – the TV series OITNB. There are powerful TV moments – and there is one when Cindy who until her encounter with Judaism has not really wanted to take responsibility for anything much in her life explains to the visiting rabbi why she wants to be Jewish:

*"I was raised ... to believe and to pray and if I was bad I'd go to hell and if I was good I'd go to heaven.*

*and here y'all say there ain't no hell*

*You're not sure about heaven and if you do something wrong you've got to figure it out yourself*

*and as far as God is concerned it's your job to keep asking questions and to keep learning and to keep arguing*

*It's like verb. You do God"*

I love it, yes absolutely it is like verb.

And this idea of people as partners with the divine in navigating and developing guidance on how to live with meaning and beauty is realised most fully in Halacha, the bedrock of Jewish practice –Halacha literally means a path for walking – in the tradition divinely inspired, but the path itself, laid out by humans.

And so we walk.

And is there anyone in Torah who walked more than Avraham Avinu (Abraham our forefather) who walked the length and breadth of the land in what has been rendered by tradition into an odyssey – a search for truth, a journey to build a life of meaning and purpose?

Tradition tell us that Avraham was always a person of action - from the age of three he wandered in his mind, turning over the world he observed, rejecting the practices around him because they made no sense to him.

And so it is when God reveals himself to Avraham he tells him to walk. Lech lecha he says. And the chapter in which we meet Avraham carries that name: You shall walk.

Move he is told, Go. Leave everything behind, start afresh. And he is not told where he needs to go, although he is very clear what needs to be left behind: his land, his birthplace, the house of his father.

And so we understand - birth is not destiny. We don't choose where we are born, and to whom, we don't choose our genetic material, or our circumstances. But still we have agency and at least some choice in the world and choice for Avraham to live a life that was as full, as meaningful as purposeful as it could be - began with that walk, and not accepting his circumstances as inevitable.

There is an enigmatic and loved Midrash about Avraham which offers a very beautiful way to consider these ideas of what it means to walk towards meaning.

Midrash at its broadest is a description of the way the rabbis read and understood biblical texts, providing additional detail or commentary – and this text is from a body of stories or homilies known as the Midrash Rabba.

*The Lord said to Avram. Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house ...To what may this be compared? To a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw a palace in flames. He wondered: is it possible to say that the palace lacks an owner? The owner of the palace looked out at him and said I am the owner of the palace so Avraham our father said is it possible to say the world lacks a master. God looked out at him and said I am the master of the world"*

The dilemma is clear. Avram sees not just any building but a palace, a beautiful, complex structure which did not just build itself. And yet it is in flames – there is disorder, chaos, the threat of total loss. There is no one to care for the palace, to extinguish the flames.

And so Avram asks - and it may be asked in scepticism, it may be in terror - is there a master and if so where is he?

It is a question we all ask frequently in the face of the randomness of life which we experience as cruel – is there a master and where is he? Why was this world created with such beauty and promise only to be left to burn?

And Avram receives an answer that is not an answer. God declares himself "I am the master" but gives no explanation.

The Hasidic commentator Meir HaShiloah, the Ishbitzer rebbe provides a way to read this.

“The master looks out at him”- the midrash says.

Avraham is the subject of the master’s gaze. In the moment that Avram despairs at the absurdity of the world, that gaze draws Avraham’s attention to himself. Avraham starts by questioning God’s absence and in looking for an answer he has to look to himself, rely on himself.

Maybe even more, in a terrifying and yet also empowering interpretation, Wherever and whoever God is, God can’t extinguish the fire. Maybe it’s God trapped in the fire, calling for help, calling for us to extinguish the fire - the response to the damage being done to the beautiful design of the palace is not humble fear, it is action.

We are the firefighters.

And we know also that the rabbis described Avraham as walking before God, not next to God or with God – but before God. It’s a radical and powerful idea however you conceive of God – that Avraham’s goodness, his action, the momentum he created through his deeds and his questions make it possible for God to be in the world and not the other way around.

And it would be nice to finish here, with this idea that the very possibility of God is enabled by human action and responsibility.

But to finish here would amount to being less than be honest about tradition, because we know also that in the story of the Akedah, the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac, this model is undercut by Avraham’s total obedience to God’s instructions. It is unintelligible to us that Avraham who so boldly questions readily agrees to do the unimaginable, the unspeakable. Where is his moral autonomy? How is this a man who walks before God?

There is no answer. Biblical and rabbinic traditions include both ideas. A path of human dignity, responsibility and persistent question and challenge, and a response that demands stillness and resignation and acceptance before God’s unknowable will.

Tradition doesn’t attempt to integrate these opposing models. There is no coherent view, the tradition never tells us how much weight to give to each approach. It is up to each of us to make those choices for ourselves.

When to stand and when to walk.

And so it remains with us. And we will spend much of the next 24 hours in this room, standing literally and in the ways I've talked about. And the process is as individual and possibly as lonely as Jewish life can be, we stand together but we each undergo this day on our own. And yet of course there is always the communal in Jewish life. And will end this day as we begin it, with verb: singing collectively.

But now as Spektor sings in her song "You've got time". We have 24 hours of standing, stillness and surrender, but also like Avraham 24 hours of walking, wandering in our own minds. Moving inwards so we can move onwards

So You've got time.

We've got time.

Good yontef.