

Erev Va-eira 5779

New Year 2019

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I wonder how many people started the New Year with a hangover – regretting, not the errors of the whole year just gone but in the last hours of 31st December? The thought came to me as I spent New Years Eve on my own with a cup of hot chocolate in a hotel room in Dayton Ohio. I had gone to visit an old friend Eric Friedland who has had a series of medical problems in the last year. You might recall that Eric was the consultant for our last two Liberal prayer books...Siddur Lev Chadash and Machzor Ruach Chadashah. Eric visited Northwood a couple of times in the past and, until his illness, watched services on our live-streaming.

Dayton was evidently once home to a large brewing industry, but this was devastated, by Prohibition, almost a century ago and still one of the paradoxes about America is that you can't buy a can of beer unless you can prove you are aged 21 or over, but can buy a gun at 14. Yet I noted in the local paper endless adverts for all manner of guns and ammunition. Not that we in the UK should be too sanguine as the New Year was marked by stabbings and I read that guns are ever more easy to obtain via adverts on the internet. And of course if we didn't have a formal Prohibition we did have a big Temperance movement in Victorian times and later. It was founded and promoted largely by the free churches, the Methodists and Quakers, campaigning vigorously for the closure of pubs and the selling of beer and spirits. I don't think the Jewish community joined in the campaign as many a pub was run by Jews, just as they had been in Poland from the 18th century onwards.

It is curious to note that in 2018 here in the UK more pubs closed than ever and I read that in the past five years 4150 pubs had closed but 2158 coffee shops had opened and it is predicted that by 2030 there will be more coffee bars than pubs. You might say this should be welcomed, but I wonder if they will begin to replicate the positive aspects of the local pub as a meeting place and social centre....will we see coffee bar quiz nights or darts matches, or will they just be a place to stare at a laptop screen in lonely isolation?

Society changes year by year...no doubt 2019 will see the closure of more butchers shops as veganism is predicted to grow, and the new year will sadly see the closure of many other town centre shops and even large department stores...will Amazon continue to rule the world or, like Apple, will it also see its dominance decline? I doubt it, but changes occur as ever, only maybe at a faster rate.

Reading the end of year predictions I found mostly gloom and doom...Brexit dominating, but other countries with their tzurris: France, Hungary, Turkey, Israel, Venezuela, and nobody I met in America wished even to pronounce the word Trump. Depressing, so let me end my first sermon of 2019 with two snippets of hope.

Firstly, with a sad look back to the death of Amos Oz at the very end of last year, I came across a brilliant lecture he gave two years ago about what is holy in Judaism. There is much common sense in it, of course, but I do want to quote on a paragraph as he attacked zealotry, fundamental extremism coming from both the Jewish and Muslim and many other camps...and his antidote...humour:

“I have never seen a fanatic with a sense of humor... especially a self-targeted sense of humor...this is a powerful immunity to fanaticism. If I could only condense the sense of humor into capsules and persuade entire populations to swallow my humor capsules, thus immunizing them to fanaticism, I would qualify for the Nobel Prize, not in Literature but in Medicine...A sacred curiosity, a sacred sense of humor...And may every one of us fight as much as we can, against the internal fanatic inside each and every one of us.”

And my second thought comes out of my experience in Dayton. I visited Eric Friedland in a most superb Care Home whose halls and every corridor were decked, not with holly, but high class Christmas decorations...with half-size Santa Claus dolls in every nook and cranny; and trees - natural, artificial and artistic everywhere. And on all the resident's doors a large Christmas stocking with their name on it. Except on Eric's door...a gift stocking - yes with his name on...but this one was coloured blue and covered in Magen David's.

Eric has had a hard life: born profoundly deaf and his mother abandoned by his father soon after. His mother not letting him learn to lipread because she said it would bring him to mix only in the company of other deaf people. And her decision worked because Eric ended up as a university professor in Jewish studies. He is an expert in Jewish liturgy and thought. But sadly, in middle age, he also developed a mysterious muscle wasting disease and then this past year a series of devastating medical issues that finds him resorting to the care home. I saw a prominent notice in his room that said that his clothes should not be removed from the room as “The Family will take care of his laundry”. I was puzzled as he has no close family. But I did know that his closest friends and supporters (as well as a Chabad rabbi) are a Muslim couple, both senior surgeons who, as it turns out, were both at that moment back in Damascus visiting parents. But another Muslim woman I had not met before came in whilst I was there. She wore attractive modern dress and with her hair covered by a stylish hat, just like a Charedi Jewish woman. And I discovered that she was the devoted person who came in regularly to take Eric's washing. And I learnt that she and the other couple were Eric's real carers. Finding him the best medical treatment, rescuing him from a substandard care home and finding him his present abode....ever devoted to his welfare. Evidently some years back Eric had given a public lecture in a local synagogue on Maimonides and a group of these middle-class Muslim intellectuals had turned up to learn. And they fell in love with Maimonides and Eric. The surgeon husband studying the Koran with Eric in Arabic, and Torah in Hebrew. But it was the *mitzvah* of care that they exemplified.

I met Siham Shalash on New Year's Day in Dayton as she came to collect Eric's dirty washing and to tell him she would call for him next week to take him to a doctor's appointment. We hear so many headline stories about fundamentalists of one religion or philosophy hating and seeking the harm of others who are of a different religion or culture. We rarely hear of

the many more good people who, with no expectation of reward or thanks, will show devoted love and care to somebody else in need, no matter their background or beliefs. It says in the Midrash (Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 10) "I call heaven and earth as witness: whether a person be Gentile or Jew, man or woman, solely according to their deeds does the holy spirit rest upon them." This has never been more true than in the case of those who care for Eric Friedland in Dayton Ohio...good Christians, Jews and Muslims. May they be blessed by the One God who blesses us all. For their deeds are holy indeed.