

ST ALBANS MASORTI SYNAGOGUE

PO Box 23, St Albans, Herts, AL1 4PH

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Lessons From Outside the Cave

One of my favourite Talmudic tales¹ tells of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his son who flee, in fear of their lives, from the Romans.

They hide in a cave for 13 years, sustained by a carob tree and a spring that, miraculously, appears to give them sustenance.

And they study Torah, together.

They come to extraordinary insights, free of the claims and clutter of the world.

They penetrate the very depths of Torah, alone.

Eventually Elijah arrives to tell the scholars that the decree against Shimon has been annulled and out they come, back into the world.

They see a world devoid of everything they gave their life to in the cave.

They see people pre-occupied with that which they didn't have to consider.

They see men working the land for a living; ploughing and sowing, forsaking Torah and,

The Talmud tells us, everywhere they set their gaze, their stare burns up what they see.

A voice calls down from the heavens and sends them back to the cave to calm down.

They are there for a year before, one Friday afternoon they come out.

And as they walk away from their cave they see a man hurrying home from the fields with two bundles of fragrant myrtles.

'What are they for?' the Rabbis ask the old man

'They are in honour of the Sabbath,' he replied.

'But wouldn't one be enough?'

The man responds, 'One is in honour of the Biblical verse that tells us to "Remember the Sabbath day," the other is in honour of the verse that tells us to "Observe the Sabbath day."'

See, Rabbi Shimon remarks to his son, how special a life of Jewish commitment is to the people of Israel.

The Rabbis learn something,

Something holy and special, from a person who works for a living.

I've had many occasions to reflect on this story, these past years.

Remarkably this is the fourth time I have had the honour of leading this special community through the Yomim Hanoraim – these Days of Awe.

Before I arrived here, of course, I had spent six years in my own version of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's cave.

I'd been studying in Yeshivot in Israel and Seminaries in New York.

¹ Shabbat 333 a-b

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And when I came to St Albans I had to emerge from my own comfortable cave-like immersion in a world of Torah.

And it takes an effort to see beyond all the ways in which this community is not like a Yeshiva or a Seminary.

It takes effort to learn how to learn from the exposure to the 'real world.'

But learn is what I have done.

I have learnt a great deal.

And this last day, these last ten days, these last three years I've taught a great deal of the Torah I learnt in my cave.

In my sermons over Rosh Hashanah I spoke about God and Mitzvah.

Last night I spoke about the impossibility of fixing that which we made crooked and this afternoon I spoke about fleshy existence and immortality.

This evening, before the gates close, I want to share some of what I have learnt outside of the cave, since I've been back in the real world, here, amongst friends.

It's a way of saying thank you.

It's a *mitzvah* – an obligation – to recognise the good.

And also, I hope, that in 'calling this,' recognising the incredible commitment and vitality that are the greatest teachings of this community we can stand together, and commit ourselves to more growth in the year ahead.

Finally I want to look ahead – where do we go now?

The first and the most important thing I have learnt is that this community works. It serves, as every good shul should do, as a Jacob's ladder connecting the heavens and the earth.

Its feet are rooted in the mundane and the ordinary – who's ordering the Kiddush, who's picking up someone who needs a lift.

And its head is in the heavens, what are we doing here, how should we, as Jews, live? SAMS is, for me, a sort of test case for the Judaism I believe in so passionately.

Way, way back, at my induction I spoke of my belief in a Judaism that stands on two legs. One rooted in the tradition, the other rooted in the contemporary world.

It's the approach to Jewish life that suffuses everything we do at SAMS, be it making decisions about the role of women in leading services, or even thinking about the kind of dress code that is appropriate for a community like ours.

We are two legged.

And while our more orthodox friends might mock the way we sometimes tug at the edges of the Halachic system and while our less traditional friends might scratch their heads over why we care, as much as we do, about the traditional liturgy and traditional observance, I believe the two-legged approach is the right one.

Two-legged sounds a little odd, let me suggest a better term, 'even-handed' – on the one hand and on the other hand.

We need to give both hands a chance to plead their case.

This even-handed approach speaks to me in my own religious life. It is the approach to Judaism I find when I pore over my books – when I retreat to my cave.

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But what I have learnt from SAMS is that the even-handed approach works in the real world too.

The even-handed approach to the tradition and to the contemporary needs of our very unique time simultaneously grounds us and shows us who we can become. The even handed approach even shows us the path which gets us there.

This works.

SAMS makes us better people, more connected into the lives of our fellow members and more connected to our history, our people and our shared futures.

One - this works.

The next thing I have learnt, from you, is that it is the little things that count.

We scrub up well, as a synagogue, when the stakes are highest.

These past ten days, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, have been wonderful.

When there have been important celebrations, or even moments of sadness, we have been out in force, in full voice, and demonstrating the warmth that is a leitmotif of everything we believe we must be.

But if you want to understand the real secret of SAMS, don't look at the big events.

Look to see who is making minyan on a Shabbat in the middle of August.

Look to see who is busy crunching numbers on a fees' database.

Look at all the people chipping in, quietly, often overlooked, always there.

It's the little things that count.

And even when things go wrong, and yes they do go wrong, they go wrong because of little things that go wrong. A half sentence here, a missed opportunity there.

We make lots of mistakes, here at SAMS, they tend to be little mistakes.

But I've learnt how important the little mistakes are.

Because it's the little things that count.

One – It works, this SAMS thing.

Two – It's the little things that count.

The third thing I have learnt is that we can, just about, trust the future.

The writer and thinker Simon Rawidowicz has called Israel, the Jews, us, 'the ever-dying people.'

It's easy to get morose.

The statistics are terrifying.

All that is lost seems so crushing. The temptation is to consider that it's all a little outdated and too much like hard work and, well, there are just so many other calls on our time.

The temptation is to wave Judaism off with a decent burial.

But no, not here.

Not at SAMS.

The future is all too bright and dynamic.

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Next Shabbat we will celebrate our first ever Youth Shabbat where as much as possible the service will be led by our youth. It's part of a new initiative of our new Cheder Principal.

And then there is the new cadre of Jewish studies GCSE students, our first ever Jewish studies AS student. Our first time *baalat musaf*, Rebecca who, please God, will shortly go on to become a Chazan.

There are seven - SEVEN – new youth-leaders in training starting on the Meltam programme, as well as two graduates of last year's Meltam, and five SAMS leaders on Noam Camp. And a slew of recent Bnei Mitzvah celebrants who have, and can, and will lead our prayer services with commitment, confidence and pride.

We are thumbing our noses at the pessimists.

And we can, just about, believe in our future.

They don't teach you that in the cave.

And on a related issue I want to say something about the future and intermarriage. I know it's hard, to be committed to a Jewish future while married to someone who isn't Jewish.

But hey, it can be hard when married to a Jew.

Marriage is hard work, committing to a Jewish future is hard work.

What I've learnt, from you, these past years is that there are Jewish people who have married non-Jews who are among the most thoughtful and most committed investors in a Jewish future.

I was recently introduced to a potential new member and we had barely begun to discuss all the good stuff going on here at SAMS when she was excusing her inevitable future lack of involvement since her 'husband wasn't Jewish.'

And my mind went to all the members of this community who aren't married to Jews and who, nonetheless commit and lead and inspire and teach me and give me grounds for believing in a Jewish future ... and I had to bite my tongue rather than tell her she would need a different excuse.

Yes intermarriage creates many challenges, but I've learnt, here at SAMS, that there is no reason for the contemporary rates of intermarriage in British Jewry to make a person want to give up in the belief that the future of Jewry, the future of SAMS, is bright and dynamic.

One – It works, this SAMS thing.

Two – It's the little things that count.

Three – We can, just about, believe in our own future.

Three glorious lessons and I am hugely grateful to you all for sharing them with me.

So here we are, busy getting on with Jewish stuff. Busy making it work, busy trying to get on with the little things and busy believing in our own future.

It's strange, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur,

A strange blend of the faces I see all the time and the faces I see only at this time.

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To those of you I see all the time, here we go again, another year of learning of growing, of caring.

To those of you I see a little less regularly – come join us on this journey.

We need your help.

Particularly to believe in our future.

Where do we go from here? A Rabbinic text.

The Talmud teaches that if a person resides in a town for 30 days, they become responsible for contributing to the communal soup kitchen.

After three months, they are responsible to the charity box.

After six months to the clothing fund.

After nine months to the burial fund.

After 12 months, the person is responsible for contributing to the repair of the town walls.²

We are now, here at SAMS, entering our 16th year.

We are no longer a shoestring operation, run on a wing and a prayer.

We now believe in our future.

And we have very reasonable grounds for holding that belief.

And after 16 years, we are becoming responsible for a finding a building – a home for our special community built not just out of commitment and sheer hard work, but also out of bricks and mortar, a home that can allow us to grow further and do more.

This is an incredibly exciting year for us at SAMS.

For some time we have been talking about a building, but in the last year we have made enormous strides.

No, the perfect location has yet to emerge, but I am beginning to believe that if it does we will be ready, and we will be able to take that next step forward.

A building – a test of our willingness to believe in our own future.

As Paul said last night, and Paul has led us in this campaign so well, we are turning to each other to support this dream.

Please do, support this dream, make the commitment to be part of building something wonderful.

Why?

Because it works.

Because we know we have something tremendous here at SAMS, something that needs to be shouted about and proclaimed.

Because the world needs more of this.

Because Judaism needs more of this.

Because we need more of this.

² BB 8a

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There are many things we still need to do.

We need to attract more members, we need to be clearer about why it's important to join SAMS, and not just have us as the place you think of as your Shul, when you are not a member.

We need to reach to the members we never see and ask them to come and join us more often.

To come and play their part in this journey.

And we need a building

Because this is how we all get a Jewish future here, in St Albans.

On this evening as the doors are closing.

Take a moment to look around, at the community you are standing with,

Think of what you learn from being a part of it.

From each other.

And pledge yourself to take another step.

Because it is the small steps that count.

The small steps that work

And the small steps that can allow us to have a future.

May we be sealed for a good one.