

# ST ALBANS MASORTI SYNAGOGUE

## Yom Kippur 5766

My friends,  
I want to share something personal. We have been on a long enough journey by this point.

*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad*  
I've always loved these words, their mystery, their importance.

*vyishachbecha uvkumecha*  
When you lie down at night and when you rise in the morning.  
I've been muttering the shema to myself for several years now, in bed before falling to sleep but things are changing.  
As you no doubt have heard, or even noticed, Josephine is expecting.  
And in the past months I have taken to saying the Shema to the ever-growing bump.

*Vhayu ha devarim ha eleh, asher anochi mtvaecha hayom al levavecha*  
And these words, that I command you this day shall be on your heart.

*Vshinantem Ivanecha*  
And you shall pass them on to your child.

And the first time I got to that line, whispering it to our unborn child, I felt the hair on my neck stand up, I felt the shudder of fear of what it means to bring a child into this world.  
And for the first time the question of how to pass on this extra-ordinary heritage we all possess became more than a question for a Jew, more than a question for a Rabbi, it became a question for a father.

*Vshinantem Ivanecha*  
What is the next Generation of Jewish life going to be like?  
What Jewish world should, please God, I prepare our child for?  
What Jewish world are we, as a community passing on to the next generation?  
Whether the next generation is you – our younger members, your children or those you support, teach, meet in the community, what is our future?

As the gates close, as the journey of the Ten Days of reflection comes to an end I want us to turn our minds to the future.  
To the responsibility to hand over a tradition to our children *Vshinantem Ivanecha*

First the bad news.  
For there is plenty of bad news.  
It seems very clear that the next generation will be far, far smaller than the current one. Jews, for various reasons, are having less children than a generation ago. An American survey found the average number of children per Jewish couple was 1.89.

# ST ALBANS MASORTI SYNAGOGUE

And that includes figures for the ultra-orthodox of around 7 children per family. For 'Jew like us' the number is far smaller.

In this country, the Board of Deputies have noted a 24% drop in the number of recorded Jewish births, from 3,300 in 1990 to 2,500 in 1999. There is nothing to suggest that this trend shows signs of abating.

One of my teachers, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, when asked 'what can I do for the future of the Jewish people?' replies with this notion – have one more kid than you were originally planning on having.

Scary advice this, religion threatening to tell me how to live my life – dangerous areas these.

People don't like hearing this answer.

And then there is the challenge of Jews who make families together with non-Jews – a challenge that dares not speak its name at SAMS, and for good reason. There are many such families here at SAMS. Many families who make enormous efforts to ensure the next generation of Jewish life is vibrant and dynamic.

We support, welcome and love these families, as we do all our members.

These are brave committed families and some of our strongest hopes for the future.

But for every one of these families, there are other families who retain membership of the community, but do not bring their children up as Jews.

And many many, more families who are not members, whose children we never see and try as we do to reach them, it is difficult, time-consuming and an often unrewarding attempt to grasp at straws.

But maybe it is a mistake to focus on issues of quantity – number – and rather we should focus on issues of quality – how involved are those people we can number. Here too I am concerned.

We have families in this community who I haven't seen at all, in the year that has passed since last we sat in judgment on this holy day.

We have families who do not contribute to the life of this holy community, or other Jewish communities. Indeed, as a shul, we are fortunate in that this model of non-involvement is so far and away NOT the norm. In many other Jewish communities the quality of involvement is far lower than we experience here .

As a child I feel I was handed an impoverished rag-bag collection of reasons to care about Judaism; a little guilt, a little chicken soup and a desire to stand up for an Israel perceived as a victim.

And today we can't be bothered with the guilt, the chicken soup might as well be Nigella Lawson's or Jamie Oliver and we aren't too sure what to make of Israel.

I never was encouraged to develop a relationship with God, with prayer, with *tzedakah*. I never experienced the extraordinary depth of the Torah and Rabbinics.

I never experienced a Shabbat day.

And without these kinds of deeper connections to Jewish life, things tend to drift, slip gently away until there is nothing left.

# ST ALBANS MASORTI SYNAGOGUE

My experience of growing up in British Jewry was that my grandparents knew less about Jewish life than their parents' generation.

My parents know less about Jewish life than my grandparents,  
And I was taught, as a child, to a level of Jewish knowledge that was beneath that of my parents.

I have worked with a number of children this year, from a number of communities, from a number of educational backgrounds.

Many can't recognise the different letters in the aleph bet. Many can't identify the books of the Bible. Many can't recite more than the opening three words of any blessing before grinding to a halt.

If the children of these students are to know less than the current generation they will know very little at all.

These things keep me awake at night.

You can look at the Jewish community and be afraid that our kind of Judaism, modern and traditional, is slowly disintegrating in front of our eyes. Wasting away.

But there is good news.

Let me look at the good news too.

And here, let me concentrate on life at SAMS.

We are thriving.

We have grown by almost 20% in the past year.

And the quality and range of our programming has been extra-ordinary.

For the littlest we have launched a new Sunday morning Singalong. We are launching, this year a new pre-Noam youth group called Tutim.

Cheder has launched the Hebrew Carousel to ensure all our youngest members get a good grounding in basic Hebrew reading.

We have a new rolling two year Bar & Bat Mitzvah programme, created by SAMS parents and educators specifically to serve the needs of our own community.

Irene has begun teaching, for the first time at SAMS, a GCSE programme for teens and adults who want either a good basic grounding in Jewish life and learning.

This year we had our first members take part in a Noam sponsored Israel tour of Israel.

Our first members to go to Israel with Marom – the Masorti young adult organisation.

Our first members take part in a Birthright trip to Israel.

We've held our first Slichot service.

And we've taken part in extra-ordinarily open and committed discussion of the role of women in leading prayer services.

We have developed standards for a range of parts of Jewish life.

I want to say a special word about the brightest sign for the future of our community that I have seen this year, Meltam

For the last year six of our teens have been taking part in Meltam a youth leadership training programme led by Jo Elias and Noam.

This year, for the first time, our own Rosh Hashanah Youth Services at SAMS were run by our own Youth Leaders.

# ST ALBANS MASORTI SYNAGOGUE

Your teenage sons and daughters, our teenage sons and daughters are taking the first steps as leaders for the next generation of SAMS youth.  
And what accomplished first steps they were.

The service they led was, according to all reports, terrific. I felt I was looking at the future of SAMS and it was bright.

I was incredibly proud to see these future leaders of our community at work on Rosh Hashanah.

I want to mention them by name, so we can all be proud of their commitment to the future of SAMS, and indeed the Jewish people; Anthony Adler, Katie Brill, Sam Cash, Mathew Hoffbrand, Tania Leigh and Claudia McQuillan. On Rosh Hashanah they were helped by Phoebe Taylor and Rachel Meier who are also hugely committed to Noam and in the coming year we look forward to Stephen Hoffbrand starting the Meltam programme at New North London Synagogue.

And behind them there are others waiting to step up; looking for chances to become leaders themselves, Miriam Oppedijk and Harry Harris helped out as assistant leaders on Kaytana.

Joe Gess and Chloe Pearce helped lead services on Rosh Hashanah.

This is an incredibly good sign.

We are, as a community, now able to take responsibility for training our own leadership, training those who will lead our children, the next generation.

I want to re-iterate. All these programmes and events are new.

Meltam, the Hebrew reading Carousel, the Bar Mitzvah Programme, the GCSE, Slichot all of them.

But not only are we doing more new things, I believe we are also doing the old things better and better.

This year has seen some of the most special *bnai mitzvah* and community events I have had the pleasure to attend.

The services, 52 weeks of the year, are led with passion and supported by so many of you in so many ways.

Noam programming is better organised and more successful than ever.

Kaytana, our day-camp, this summer was a huge success,

as was the Second Night Seder

CAFÉ is in danger of becoming too successful.

The adult education events have been a joy to be part of.

And on the list goes.

When you look at SAMS, you see a community and a future that is bright, welcoming, warm and dynamic.

SAMS is not slowly slipping away,

SAMS is not gently disappearing into a dark night.

We are innovating, growing, developing.

# ST ALBANS ASORTI SYNAGOGUE

SAMS is full of the commitment, passion, kindness and love of Jewish life that ensures a Jewish future, and a bright Jewish future for the next generation.

*Vshinantam levanecha* indeed.

At our heart is the belief that Judaism works, that it is valuable, important, and also that it is not only compatible with living in the modern world, but even that this is the best way to live, as Jews, in St. Albans, in the year 5766.

So here we have two entirely differing perceptions of our future.

One desperately bleak.

The other vibrant and bursting with life.

And here comes the message.

There is no secret to the successes we are having at SAMS.

The dynamism is not a magic potion.

It is the result of the commitment of individuals.

A parent here, a member there, a teenager somewhere else.

Never doubt the ability of an individual to make a difference.

Never doubt your own ability to make a difference.

The lesson of SAMS is that individuals count.

Our success is the result of people seeing a lack and stepping in to give of their own time and commitment to make us stronger.

We need you, the sake of the future of the Jewish community.

No matter your age, no matter your levels of knowledge or your length of membership at SAMS you each have the ability to make a difference, to fulfil the obligation

*vshinantam levanecha*.

You each hold the possibility of a bright future for SAMS, for the Jewish community in this country, for people Israel, in your own hands.

We are working hard to increase the range and quality of our provision in the community, there is much to get involved in, but there are still holes and we are still working to do more.

If there is something you know what you want to see at SAMS, please let me know and we will try and connect you to someone who can help.

If you are not sure where you can help, or what you would want to learn, please let me know and I will make whatever suggestions I can.

Just don't walk away, it is simply too important a time to walk from the future of the Jewish people.

When we think of this phrase, *vshinantam levanecha*

And you shall pass this heritage on to the next generation,

We need to think of our own willingness to be that force for transformation, commitment and passion.

What can I do to ensure Jewish life for the next generation.

For the thing depends on each of us sitting here today.

# ST ALBANS MASORTI SYNAGOGUE

I want to finish with a Rabbinic tale<sup>1</sup> I used last year at SAMS, many wonderful things have happened in the meantime, but nothing has changed the extraordinary truth of this tale.

A wise Rabbi is faced with a dilemma.

He is being taunted by a couple of troublemakers, fourth century hoodies.

They come to him with a question with no right answer.

I have, one of them says, a bird in my hand. If you are so clever, you have to tell me if the bird is alive or dead.

The Rabbi can hear the bird chirping, so he knows if he says the bird is dead the boy will open his hand and the bird will fly away, proving him wrong.

But if he says the bird is alive, the boy will squeeze his hand shut, killing the bird, and again the Rabbi will be wrong.

The Rabbi responds with wise words,

'I do not know, but the future is in your hands.'

In the service to come, the last hour before the gates close and Yom Kippur is behind us, please commit yourselves to seeing yourselves as the future of the people of Israel, the future of Anglo Jewry and the future of SAMS.

Please commit, in the coming year, to being part of this bright future.

Please commit to being the difference between the good news and the bad, between wasting away and becoming ever stronger.

Working together, with all the skills, energy and passion that we have, we can be that possibility, the possibility of a brighter, more dynamic, more committed Jewish life.

The future is in our hands.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bereishit Rabbah 19:11