

ST ALBANS MASORTI SYNAGOGUE

Good Enough

I have very special memories of these days.

I grew up as a member of New London Synagogue. And, at the age of seven or eight, I remember scurrying out from the children's service to sit with my mother, high in the gallery.

And I would look down on all the white tallitot and hope that my dad would turn around and smile.

And I would hear those tunes. The tunes of these awesome days.
And long before I wanted to be a Rabbi,
long before I understood the Hebrew,
long before I could even read the English,
the hair would stand up on the back of my neck.

And at the front, stood before the ark of the New London Synagogue, dressed in white would be George, the Chazan and I can still hear his voice.
I still hear the tunes in my mind.
Those tunes, that chazzan, capture, for me, the majesty of these days.

We have, as a community, done something very special these last months.
We have engaged in a serious discussion about the role of women in leading prayers in this holy community.

We have asked the question, what kind of memories will the seven and eight year olds in this community have of these prayers, of these days, when they are old enough to have children themselves?

Specifically we have asked the question of whether it is possible, in a generation's time, that the next generation of SAMS members might have memories of female voices, female chazanim singing these most powerful of tunes.

And we have concluded that discussion. As *mara d'atra* – the legal decisor of this community – I have decided that we will begin to integrate our most committed and gifted female prayer leaders alongside our most committed and gifted men.

We will become the first British Masorti Shul to make this change, as a synagogue.

Other shuls, other communities have tried to have similar discussions to the discussion we have had in the past year. And many of these other communities have been unable to withstand the pressure, the heat, that this issue generates.

There have, of course, also been members of SAMS who have spoken against us taking the steps that we will, in the coming weeks, be taking.

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But, the fact that we have not lost a single member over this issue is something to be enormously proud of.

I want to, publicly, acknowledge those of you who are sitting here, listening to me discuss a change that you have honestly and with great dignity opposed. I don't presume to know how it feels to have your shul, the shul you love so deeply and with such commitment, take a step away from what you would wish it to be.

The Hebrew word for patience, *savlanut*, comes from root *sovel* – pain. I want to thank you for your patience. I know that it must hurt.

So what have we done?

What has led us to the decisions we have taken on the role of women in leading prayer services?

The first thing we did was study.

We deepened our connection to our masorah – our heritage, on this journey.

The single most important text on this journey of study has been from the five hundred year old text from the Shulchan Arukh that defines the essential qualities of a *shaliach tzibbur* – a leader in prayer.

The *shaliach tzibbur* must be *hagun*¹

They must be appropriate.

So we should ask the question, what does it mean to be *hagun*, appropriate, to lead services at SAMS? In one Talmudic text² the Rabbis suggest that it should be someone with a large family and no means of support.

An interesting idea. What would it mean if we only allowed people who really knew what it was to need something, to lead us in prayer? What would it mean if we only allowed people who felt a great sense of anxiety and people who believed in the power of prayer as a vehicle for easing that pain?

That would be appropriate. But who would come forward?

In another text, from the writings of the Chasidic master Rebbe Nachman of Breslav,³ we find another idea. The Hebrew term, *shaliach tzibbur*, messenger of the community, could also be translated as 'one does the searching for a community'. Says Rebbe Nachman, the job of the *shaliach tzibbur* is to search out in each of the people in the community a *nikudah tovah* – a spark of goodness and holiness, even amongst the greatest sinners of Israel.

[point ark]

The task of someone who goes before the ark is to find goodness in every person, even the fools, even the wicked and line up all these points as notes in the *niggunim*, the tunes that they sing.

¹ SA OH 53:5

² Taanit 16a

³ Likutei Moharan 121b

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And, says Rebbe Nachman, it is only if they can do this they are to be considered *hagun emet*, truly appropriate.

And who, among us, are at that level of sweet goodness, harbouring no grudge, seeing only the good and blinding our eyes to the failings of those of us who stand here today. Who would come forward?

This is daunting, this *shaliach tzibbur* business, this challenge of leading a community in prayer. I'm scared to stand here as your *shaliach tzibbur* because I know my voice isn't up to it, because I don't have mastery over the tunes, because I occasionally stumble over the Hebrew, because, thank God, I don't know from my own life the hardship that would really test my faith and sharpen my petitions, because my life is too full of missed opportunities and sins and emotional baggage and personal failings. because I lack the qualities needed to be *hagun emet*, to be truly appropriate for the task at hand.

So yesterday when I tried to lead you, to lead us in prayer, I came up short.

At least I'm not the first *shaliach tzibbur* to be cowed by the expectations, the demands of this most unique of responsibilities. Yesterday I began the repetition of the Shacharit amidah with ancient words, from a failed and, by his own admission, inappropriate *shaliach tzibbur* of the eleventh century.

With humility and apprehension I offer my supplication to implore Thee,
O revered and exalted God.

May my prayer be acceptable to Thee and not be regarded as worthless.
When Thou search my deeds my heart sinks within me, and my stricken
soul trembles at the approach of judgement day. If sin were requited in
full, who could survive?

And if the author of that prayer, Yekutiel ben Moshe of Speyer, is inappropriate, who would we have?

If the standard of *shlihut* in this community was the standard of the image of the poor man with many children from the Talmud, or the standard of the person who sees only good among their community, the standard of Rebbe Nahamn, who would come forward?

Thankfully there is something else.

Having said that the *shaliach tzibbur* should be *hagun*, appropriate, and having defined what it is to be appropriate, our legal codes soften. And suggest something else.

The *shaliach tzibbur* must be desired by their community. And if, teaches the Shulchan Arukh, you can't find someone truly appropriate, someone entirely free of sin, free of frivolity, free of any grudge or failing, then you chose as best as you can.

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This is radical.

This means that the test of whether or not I, or Stephen or Jonny, or any of us is capable of leading us in prayers is up to you, us, the community. This means that we get to tell our leaders in prayer whether they are good enough, or not.

Every time we say 'amen' to a blessing we stand beside our *shlichei tzibur*. Or we don't bother.

Every time we join with them in song as they reach a particular liturgical highlight we affirm that they are good enough to represent us. Or we do it begrudgingly.

When we ask our leaders in prayer to stand here and petition the great Court on High on our behalf, we get to give **them** the opportunity to find in each of **us** the spark of goodness that might even be lost to our own eyes.

What an incredible training for the serious work of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. What an incredible training for life. That in order to be part of this community we need to affirm that someone else is good enough to lead us. We need to affirm, in public, before this holy community, before the ghosts of the memories of our childhood, before the ghosts of all the great *shlichei tzibur* of centuries past ...

We need to affirm that a sinner, like me, like Jonny or like Stephen, like any of us who have or who will lead prayers, in this community or in other communities, today or in days to come ... To affirm that *that* someone else is good enough.

This is the possibility that presents itself to us today and every time we come to synagogue.

We have the possibility of affirming that another person is good enough.

How counter-cultural.

How contrary to the norms and typical modalities of the society in which we all live.

I was educated in a school where one demonstrated one's own brilliance by putting down one's challenger. I was educated at a University where intellectual acumen was used to take out one's opponent in argument. I was brought up to believe that gratuitously affirming other people as good enough suggested some kind of weakness.

Anyone who dared put themselves forward, in a position of leadership, was there to be disproved, exposed as a charlatan, a fraud.

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My friends, these are the values and the norms of the society many of us we live in and work in. These are the values and the norms of the newspapers and magazines and television programmes and web-sites that bombard our souls 24/7.

And I see it in the way celebrities and sportsmen and women, and politicians are chewed up and spat out as *not good enough*.

And I see in the way people treat waiters and supermarket cashiers and traffic wardens and school teachers and complete strangers.

And I see it among teenagers and kids, picking up on each other's flaws and magnifying them because they are not *thin* enough, or not *well-dressed* enough, or not *cool* enough – *not good enough*.

God help us

No wonder 10% of teenagers are suffering psychological trauma. They don't feel good enough. Because all around them they are being continually told they are not. And now I have a child. And all I want, from this miraculous bubbly baby boy, is that he should never feel that he is not good enough. All I want is that he should always know how special, how totally wonderful, he is. All I want to do is protect him from the nasty, petty, dehumanising way in which our society tells us that we are not good enough.

All I want to do is protect him from that soul-draining, life emptying horror of not feeling good enough. I'm sure all of you, with children feel the same way. But this is not just the way of a parent, it is the way of an ancient tradition, our ancient tradition.

It is the Jewish way.

The Jewish way is to go through our lives affirming the sparks of goodness in each other. The Jewish way is to affirm that our fellows are good enough. They may err, they may make mistakes, but that is no more and no less than what it is to be a good enough human.

This is my message for us today. This is my plea; that we should take more seriously than ever the holy work of affirming each other as good enough. That we should affirm our friends, our work colleagues, our acquaintances, the strangers we pass on the street.

We should become so much better at affirming each other as good enough. It doesn't take much. A smile might do it, or you could pull off this incredible act of holiness by saying 'thank you,' sending an e-mail, making a charitable contribution in someone's honour. Being complimentary shouldn't be difficult.

This is a dream.

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That we should spread a virus in this shul, a virus that not only sees the good in one another, but is prepared to recognise it, applaud it, value it publicly. And that the virus should spread beyond these walls into the world out there, where this attitude towards life, towards our fellow human beings is so desperately needed.

My prayer is that we should become, as a community, great spiritual adepts in the art of affirming one another as good enough.

Which brings me back to the question of women and leading prayers at SAMS.

I know, I know on a certain level it *is* possible to make the case that just because a particular community won't allow women to lead prayers doesn't *necessarily* mean that that community thinks any less of its women. I know that it *is* possible to think that women are perfectly good enough in all sorts of ways, other than leading services, and not to *mean* to demean 50% of the Jewish people.

I know it *is* possible to feel that the unique nature of woman should keep her from leading a community in prayer before God, but not stop her in other enormously important ways from serving the Holy Blessed One. I know all this is possible. But I don't believe it.

If we, as a community, say we do not wish to have women act as our messengers before God we say that we do not consider them sufficiently *hagun*.

And that sounds too close to suggesting that women are not good enough. Of course there are some women who should not serve as leaders of the community in prayer, just as there are some men who should not take that honour.

But I cannot say that no woman should act as a *shaliach tzibbur* no matter how gifted she might be, no matter how appropriate she might be in every single other way, other than her gender. I can't do it, because to do so is to say that there is something wrong, something lacking, something not good enough.

Again, to those of you who have opposed this step with decency and dignity, I ask your forgiveness. I don't in any way wish to accuse you of anything other than caring as deeply as I, with many, many good and decent justifications for your position. Your voices and opinions are valued, respected and cherished, you remain close to my heart, close to the heart of this special community.

But I believe the right way, for this community, is to go forward, and say to all our members, male and female, "Yes you can be *hagun*, yes you are appropriate to represent us in prayer before our God. Yes you are good enough."

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And so we will take this bold step in the coming weeks and then what?
We don't know.

Will history judge us as unfairly swayed by a passing feminist fancy that will
blow away as swiftly as it blew into the last century?

Will, despite our best efforts, this special community fold and the great dream
of a committed, traditional and open-minded Judaism in St. Albans fail?

We don't know.

But I don't think it will, because at the heart of this decision lies, not a
willingness to be blown along on the winds of fashion.

At the heart of this decision lies a commitment to a most singularly important
principle of Jewish life, as old as Sinai, the commitment to consider my fellow
hagun - good enough.

Good enough, even, to be written and sealed in the book of life, health,
happiness and success in the year to come. May it come to us all.