

Choosing the Berit

It is a great honour to be invited to address you on this special evening of Kol Nidrei. It is also a particular pleasure for me, personally. In an important sense I began my rabbinic training at Radlett. Even before I attended my first lecture at Leo Baeck College in October 1984, the preceding Summer term I began teaching at the cheder - rather green around the ears and just one week ahead of the class. I continued teaching for a further three years, and one of the joys of returning to Radlett is meeting up again with my former students. It was also in the presence of this community that I read the Torah for the first time and delivered my first sermon on Shabbat Lech Lecha in October 1985. And it was at Radlett, too, that I worked as a 'junior warden' under the gentle guidance of Dani Kornhauser and learnt about the 'stage-management' dimension of religious services.

I came to Radlett in the first place because of Rabbi Barbara Borts, my mentor and friend, whose vibrant dynamism has been a fundamental influence on my rabbinate. I return here because of Rabbi Alexandra Wright, my co-worker and also my friend, whose integrity and passion for righteousness are a continual source of inspiration for me. If all three of us got together, we would make quite a Beit Din!

I return here to offer some reflections for Yom Kippur. This evening is the beginning of a long day and I want to start at the very beginning. What do we need to have with us before we sit down to participate in one of the High Holy day services? A machzor to follow the prayers, perhaps a cushion or a sweater - especially for Yom Kippur afternoon when one can feel quite low. I often think that it wouldn't be a bad idea if synagogues issued their members with a 'Glossary of Terms' - a small booklet listing all those key words that only seem to come up a few times a year, with some easy to understand explanations. Words like sin, transgression, repentance, atonement, redemption, salvation. I don't intend to imply by this suggestion that we don't know what these words mean in a literal sense, but what do they mean to us as **Jews**, as **Reform Jews**, **today**, in the context of **our lives**?

If I were putting a 'glossary' together, one of the first items I'd want to include is **covenant - berit** in Hebrew - and that's the word I want to talk about this evening. Covenant - an old fashioned term from the world of legalise. A covenant is an **agreement**. The Hebrew word **berit** or **beris** is more familiar - at least in the context of **berit milah**, circumcision. But interestingly, when it comes to the ritual for welcoming an eight day old Jewish boy into the covenant, the **berit** part tends to be subsumed by the **milah**. We may talk about going to a **beris**, but what we tend to focus on is the act of **circumcision** - particularly when we are present witnessing the ritual. How many of us reflect on the meaning of our people's covenant with God when the mohel is practising his craft?

Like Shabbat, circumcision is a **sign** of the covenant, it is not the covenant itself. Indeed, as Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman demonstrates in his new book, 'Covenant of Blood', if the act of circumcision was the covenant, half the Jewish people would not be part of it. So what is the meaning of **berit**? What is this Jewish 'agreement' all about? At Rosh Hashanah the second Torah reading was from Deuteronomy chapter 29 in the parashah, **Nitzavim**. That passage takes us back to the wilderness of Sinai when we are told everyone 'stood' together 'ready to enter the covenant of the Eternal your God, with its sanctions, which the Eternal your God makes with you today' (:11)

The text then goes on to explain further (:12):

Through it God confirms that you are His people and that He is your God, as God has said and as God swore to each of your ancestors in turn, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.

As the people at Sinai stood together ready to enter the covenant with God, they were reminded that God was fulfilling the agreement made with their ancestors - that they were 'standing' there 'today' because of the promises which God had made with the patriarchs 'yesterday'.

But what has this agreement confirmed over 3000 years ago got to do with us? A naive question? You've probably heard the official explanation many times. The passage closes with the words (:13-14):

Not only with you do I make this covenant, with its sanctions,
with those who are with us today, standing before the Eternal our God,
but with those, too, who are not present this day.

According to commentators down the centuries, that means **us**, all the generations of Jews. What is more, the notion of 'time' is actually irrelevant. In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel (Machzor, p.871):

Sinai is both an event that happened once and for all, and an event that happens all the time... The day of giving the Torah can never become past; that day is this day, every day.

Indeed, that's the spirit in which we are supposed to experience the reading of the Ten Commandments on Shavuot as well as the readings from Deuteronomy and Exodus on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur which relate the events at Sinai. But the question is, **do we?** Do we feel that we are part of a covenant with God, **today and every day?**

Which brings me back to circumcision. Around four years ago, while working as a congregational rabbi, I was approached by a family who wanted a **berit** ceremony for their son - **without the milah**. They had come to me after having had the door closed on them everywhere else in the area. A little startled by the request, I first enquired about their Jewish status. This confirmed, I arranged to go and see them to listen to their story, and to talk things through - to make sure they were fully aware of the implications of their decision. It became clear that they were intelligent people who had actively chosen to be part of the covenant, who were committed to living Jewishly and to bringing their child up as a Jew - that is why they wanted him to have a covenant ceremony. Finally, I explored some of the psychological issues: 'Don't you want your son to look like you?' I asked the father. 'Yes', he replied, 'that's another reason why I don't think the act of circumcision is so important. I'm not circumcised, either'. He was from Argentina. Most of his Jewish male relatives were not circumcised and he claimed that this was true for many Jewish men in Argentina. Originally, it was a way of not being too different. But these same men were active members of the Jewish community. Indeed, he had been a member of a synagogue at home and he wanted to be a member in England, too - with his new family. Recognising their commitment, I agreed to officiate at the berit - without milah - and at our next meeting we discussed the format of the ceremony. When the day came, the house was packed with family and friends - much like any other berit. Needless to say, they joined the congregation.

That experience taught me something very important about the meaning of berit - that it is not an abstract theological concept, it comes alive in the context of our lives. Since that time, I have also officiated at two covenant ceremonies for daughters - my own nieces. In all three cases, the parents were conscious of bringing their children into the covenant between God and the people Israel. The berit represents their commitment to live as Jews.

Four years ago, the family who approached me with their unusual request were a special case. In the past year, circumcision has become a live issue. But the problem is that in the heat of the emotions exploding on all sides, the importance of **berit**, of **covenant** itself, has almost entirely evaporated. A few weeks ago I met a woman who lives a very Jewish life together with her non-Jewish husband, their seven year old daughter and their non-circumcised four year old son. They have a Jewish home. They participate in the life of their local progressive synagogue. With the help of their rabbi, the little boy had a berit ceremony - without milah - when he was a baby. Her family were not thrilled about it, neither were some of her friends. 'Why is it', she asked, 'that some people do absolutely **nothing** Jewish **except** circumcise their sons and yet they are seen as **maintaining** Jewish life, and I'm seen as **undermining** Judaism? Surely, it's keeping a Jewish home, educating your children to be proud Jews and participating in the life of your synagogue that really matters?'

Whatever one thinks about their decision not to practice milah, there can be no doubt that these two families are choosing to be part of the berit. Ironically, they are probably choosing to be part of it more consciously than many other Jews who don't actually go through the process of **deciding** to circumcise their sons - **they just do it**. But what about those **other** Jews - which probably includes most of **us**? Yom Kippur is an opportunity, not only to acknowledge our misdeeds but to reflect on **our lives**, to think about **what** we are doing and **why**, to ask ourselves what **choices** we are making for our lives. But my guess is that very few of us feel that we are making any **active choices** - even in being here this evening. We feel called here, pulled here, perhaps caught here, trapped here. We have to be here. Maybe against our better judgement. And then there is **God**. Choosing to live Jewishly is one thing. But what does it really mean to be part of a covenant **with God** - to be in a **relationship** with God? On Yom Kippur, in synagogue, it is practically impossible to avoid that question. But search as we might, the clues to answering it are not really here in the services. They begin with us; with **our own lives**; with **our own relationships**; with **the covenants we make with those we love**.

If we are not sure what it means to be in a covenant with God, the covenant made by two people pledging themselves to one another may serve as a model. Indeed, it is a model that we find both in the Bible and in rabbinic writings. The prophet **Hosea** proclaims the covenant of God and the people Israel with a beautiful formulation which is recited when laying tefillin (2:21-22):

I betroth you to me forever
I betroth you to me with integrity and justice, with tenderness and love
I betroth you to me with faithfulness
And you will know the Eternal.

Then there is the biblical book, **The Song of Songs, Shir HaShirim** - included in the Bible because Rabbi Akiva, a second century sage managed to persuade his colleagues that what reads like erotic love poetry is really an allegory for the love affair between God and Israel.

In a few weeks time, I will officiate at the wedding of two women who have been sharing a Jewish home together for three years. They have created the ceremony themselves because there is no official liturgy for same-sex marriages as yet - although a Rabbinic Working Party has just been set up to investigate the issue. Their ceremony draws on many of the elements found in the Jewish marriage service - the ketubah, the chuppah, the two glasses of wine. They have called their wedding **Berit Ahavah**, a **Covenant of Love** - one of the phrases included in the Reform ketubah. They have also chosen to express their vows to one another with the words of Hosea because they wish to declare that the covenant they are making is **forever**, that it is based on **integrity, justice, tenderness and love**, and demands **faithfulness**. Moreover, they have chosen to express their covenant with Jewish language and symbols because they see their marriage as a central feature of their commitment to live together as **Jews**.

The example of two women consciously devising a ceremony to mark their covenant of love reminds us what we already know about heterosexual marriage but perhaps take for granted because it is more familiar. The point is that the covenant made between two people is the key to what the covenant with God involves; **the loving commitment of two individuals for one another is a model for our relationship with God**.

And central to this model is the fact that the forging of a covenant revolves around the **active choices** made by both parties. Just as our ancestors chose to enter into the covenant at Sinai, with the words 'na'aseh venishma', 'we will do and we will listen' (Exodus 24:7), so we, too, must **choose**. We may be born into the opportunity to live as a Jew, we may experience a covenant ceremony expressing our parents' hopes for our Jewish lives, but, ultimately, **every Jew must choose to be a Jew** - not just those who undergo 'conversion'. **Every Jew** - not just those who are married and live in families. While marriage may serve as a **model** for the covenant with God it is not a **substitute** for it. The modern orthodox scholar, Irving Greenberg argues that after the Shoah, the covenant has become 'voluntary', the relationship between God and Israel is no longer a 'given'; each individual chooses to be part of the covenant. I would say that in an important sense this has always been the case. Towards the end of Yom Kippur, we will read again from the parashah **Nitzavim** - this time from Deuteronomy Chapter 30, the end of the portion (15;19):

See, I set before you this day life and good, death and evil...

I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse.

Therefore, you shall choose life...

Therefore **you shall choose life - u'vacharta bachayyim**. The word **you** here is in the **singular**. We may gather together as a community, but the challenge is to **every individual Jew. Choose Life**. That is perhaps the key message of this **day out of life. Today** is an opportunity **for each and every one of us** to make decisive choices for our lives, to covenant ourselves to God or to renew our covenant with God, to commit ourselves to realising our own potential and to restoring our relationships. If it seems a tall order and some of us feel a little sceptical about the prospect of effecting any real changes in our lives, perhaps we need to remember the power of **hope** in the life of our people and recall the lives of **individual Jews that were transformed** on Yom Kippur. The scholar, Franz Rosenzweig, a colleague of Martin Buber, was on the verge of converting to Christianity, when he went to synagogue one Yom Kippur and became a committed, believing Jew. More poignantly -

and more significantly for Reform Jews this Yom Kippur - Rabbi Hugo Gryn, **zichrono livrachah - may his memory be for a blessing** - related how he found God during his 'first Yom Kippur in the camps'. Rabbi Gryn wrote later (see 'Churban' by Rabbi Tony Bayfield, 1981, pp.187-8):

Two contradictory emotions governed much of my inner life: that I was innocent and that I was abandoned. They came to a head during my first Yom Kippur in the camps. We knew the date and like many others I fasted and created a little hiding place for myself among stacks of insulation boards. I spent most of the usual working day there - at first reciting bits of remembered liturgy, even singing the Kol Nidre, asking for God's forgiveness for promises made and not kept. But eventually I dissolved into crying. I must have sobbed for hours. Never before, nor since have I cried with such intensity. And then I seemed to be granted a curious inner peace. Something of it is still with me. I believe that God was also crying. And I understand a bit of the revelation that is implicit in Auschwitz. It is about man and his idols. Only I could abandon God. I would like you to understand that in that builder's yard, on that Day of atonement, I found God. But not the God I had childishly clung to until those jet streams dissolved over Auschwitz.

Rabbi Hugo Gryn's experience changed the whole course of his life. On that Yom Kippur in 1944, he found peace and he discovered God. And he entered into a relationship with God that became a life-long commitment, inspiring his work for understanding and respect between peoples, faiths and races, and within the Jewish community itself. Hugo Gryn's story is deeply moving and it is probably utterly unique. Most of us will never confront such an awesome challenge. And yet the opportunity to find God is also present in the circumstances of our own, less extraordinary lives. And it is present **today**. All we have to do is to **recognise God in our own experience** - crying or laughing or simply **being here with us**. All we have to do is to **choose to grasp the opportunity of making the word berit come alive in our lives**.

The gift of Yom Kippur lies before us: **May each and every one of us find the courage and the honesty to open ourselves to the possibilities which this day holds**. And let us say: Amen.

