Moving Forward Steadily Together - Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780

Last Wednesday, I spent an hour studying and reading slowly and carefully verses from the Book of Proverbs. My chavruta, my study partner, and I meet most weeks and it is one of the better habits I have developed to keep myself learning and growing. In every lesson, a text read and translated slowly and deliberately throws up new insights that we would have missed if we'd been operating at "normal speed", especially in an era where normal speed has become almost supersonic and the background radiation of chatter, traffic, 24-hour news and suchlike means that calm, slow, deeper learning becomes very much harder to achieve.

In the examination of a few verses of Proverbs chapter 1, some pieces fell into place that gave me new insights into the dangerous, on the edge situation that is plaguing our country and giving, I strongly suspect, everyone here this evening cause for concern. Here are some of the pieces.

Since I first read his book "Hit The Ground Kneeling", I have always remembered Bishop Stephen Cottrell's description of the Scout Leader who walked, rather than ran to the scene of a reported heart attack. When asked about this later, the Leader said that he knew if he arrived out of breath, he would not be able to give CPR and deliver the needed oxygen of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

In the same book, he explained that the title is to oppose the still in vogue attractive idea that someone should always hit the ground running. What he asks, if you don't know the direction you should be taking? What, he asks, if you do not know if the terrain might be treacherous and you could fall over with inevitable bad consequences. For Bishop Cottrell, *Hit The Ground Kneeling* is his religion's approach that prayer can provide the clarity of thinking to enable action. I have learned that Judaism advocates study as the source for such clarity.

Next, one of my favourite films is Dead Poets' Society. In one scene, the teacher has his class of young men - it was a single sex school - walking in a quadrangle. In only a short time, most are marching in time with each other and their individuality has been subsumed. It is a salutary lesson for them, and for me!

In a very different setting, the judges of the Supreme Court heard arguments over three days in the constitutionally very important case about the Prime Minister's proroguing of Parliament. We were initially told that their judgement might be given the following day, Friday. Instead the judgement was carefully and calmly delivered by Lady Hale at 10:30 on the fifth day following the hearing. The time taken to consider their judgement was vitally important. It takes a split second to make a judgement; it takes much longer to exercise judgement. Pre-judging, prejudice arises when we do not take time to consider what we have heard - whether we agree with it or not - and to evaluate it carefully. As we enter these aseret y'mei teshuvah - ten days of repentance - may we all take time to exercise judgement and I hope we will all resolve to stop making premature judgements and re-start the important practice of considering the evidence so that we can reach a judgement. The Supreme Court has taught us all an important lesson, if we will only heed it!

Staying with the Supreme Court and the ripples that followed from the judgement delivered last Tuesday morning, I am sure that I am not alone to be sickened by the tone of the conversations that have followed, both in the House of Commons and elsewhere. The language of aggression and threat, or dismissal of worries and concerns for health and for life cannot be part of civil and civilised discourse. I support the statement made by all 118 Bishops of the Church of England and I applaud them for publicly making such a statement. I hope we in this synagogue and in

the Liberal Jewish movement will seek to advocate more polite public conversation, and that we will seek to model such civilised disagreement in all our debates and discussions in Council, on committees, in our synagogue and in our homes, workplaces, schools, and social settings. We owe it to ourselves and our neighbours to do unto others as we would wish to be treated by others.

I could add more of the pieces into the sermon, but am reasonably sure that (a) you don't want a long sermon, and (b) I have set out a clear enough picture. What was it the the Book of Proverbs added?

Chapter 1 centres on instruction from a father and mother to their son. Verses 10 - 14 paint a picture of the temptation of running with robbers or thieves, verses 15, where we picked up on Wednesday, to 19 set out why the author and parent believes that a wise person will not succumb to the temptation. Verse 16 states:

כִּ֤י רַגְלֵיהֶם֙ לָרָ֣ע יָרֻ֔וצוּ וַיְמַהֲר֖וּ לִשְׁפָּךְ־דָּֽם׃

For their feet run towards evil; they hasten to shed blood.

We alighted on the Hebrew very resh - vav - tzadee, which means 'to run' and its linguistic cousin resh - tzadee - heh, *ratza*, which means 'to want'. One means to rush physically to or from something; while when we want something, we rush emotionally towards it. Both convey the sense that we hasten, perhaps unduly.

This season fulfils and responds to the adage "act in haste, repent at leisure." We take these ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur to repent for those hurried wants, those rushed decisions, those wants we could not wait to satisfy, those times we have succumbed to the temptation of running towards something, only to realise all too late that the things towards which we were heading was evil, vanity, emptiness. Another biblical book, Kohelet or Ecclesiastes, is devoted to exploring

the empty vanities that human beings lust for and are never satisfied by. When we run - *narutz* - towards something bad, we might get to it, and realise its harm, or trip up and hurt ourselves along the way. Either way, it ends badly.

There is a third related biblical Hebrew root, also from resh - tzadee - heh, which means to ‘be pleased with’ or, we might say in tonight’s context, ‘to be wanted’. This is perhaps best known in the form כֵּן יְהִי רָצוֹן, which means “May this be acceptable to God”.

So, tonight and throughout the year 5780, may we not run, but proceed steadily and safely, assisting everyone who needs help to travel at this speed, and allowing all to walk in their own way - à la Dead Poets Society. May we take time to ensure that our goals and our methods of achieving them are such as to find favour in God’s eyes. May our words and our deeds benefit from the exercising of considered judgement, and may we avoid rash and ill-considered prejudices. May the tone of our conversations among ourselves always be respectful, no matter what our differences of opinion, and may we also know when we stray from differences of opinion into territory where facts are being challenged not by other facts, but by rumour, gossip, conspiracy theory, racism or sexism. May we never hit the ground, whether running or kneeling, but move lightly along it, treasuring the earth as we go about our sacred work.

May this be God’s will as I hope it will be ours - כֵּן יְהִי רָצוֹן וְנֹומַר אָמֵן and let us say, Amen.