The Descent of Man - Yom Kippur Morning 5780

The Torah portion that we have just read replaced the traditional reading of Leviticus chapter 16, which sets out how the High Priest offered sacrifices and negotiated the ritual of the two scapegoats on this Day of Atonement. While the focus of that reading is on one powerful man in the Jewish community - the High Priest - our text is much more ethical in its content. However, it is still subtly male dominant. Look at those first two verses on p.267: first the powerful men are listed, then all men, then the children, and only then the wives! The Torah takes male dominance for granted.

Nearly three thousand years later, I'm not really sure how much we have moved on. I say this as a lowly member of a sub-group of the population that is particularly responsible for the planet-threatening, gender-violence perpetrating, socially divisive, economically immoral and morally bankrupt world we all inhabit. The sub-group I am referring to is, of course, mostly white, predominantly heterosexual privileged men.

It is THIS group of the population that has an almost unshakeable grip on power - economic, political, religious, and social. Men have grabbed and abused power, grabbed and abused women and children, grabbed and abused earth's wonderfully diverse nature, grabbed and abused the world about which we were told - "Look after My creation and steward it well, for if you do not, there will be no-one to come after you to look after it."

The latest headline actors of this group have excelled at abusing their privilege. Here in the UK, real concerns voiced by several women MPs a fortnight ago about the effects of toxic, divisive language on their safety and the wellbeing of their staff were dismissed by the Prime Minister, no less, with the words: "I have to say, Mr Speaker, I've never heard such humbug in all my life."

On the same day, the President of the United States patronisingly dismisses Greta Thunberg as his latest show of white male privilege. One of these two uses pre-pubescent language badly, the other is a 16 year-old Swedish citizen who is galvanizing millions of people to actively campaign for action on climate change.

With these two leaders and, sadly, a long list of others fitting the same bill, is it really any wonder that we live in a society where 95% of all domestic abuse is perpetrated by men, and where 58,657 rapes were recorded by the police in 2018?

The masculinity of what Grayson Perry, in his very readable book *The Descent of Man*, has termed Default Man and Old School Man has given them privileges that are so subconsciously present as to be taken for granted. Yet, the Default Man model has also trapped successive generations of men into a repressive, emotional desert of frustration at not being adequate and not being able to ask for or accept help. Perry advocates the need for new masculinities that better fit a world in which equality between the sexes is held as a core value.

Despite this already being a core value of Liberal Judaism, I don't feel we have succeeded in attaining full equality between the genders. I worry that some discrimination based on gender is institutionalised, even in ELELS. By the end of 2019, we will have celebrated Bar Mitzvah for six young men in our community. I don't believe it is a statistical freak and that no young women in our community turn thirteen during 2019. Do you?

I worry when we still favour women to light the Shabbat candles, and men for Torah duties and aliyot. I worry when at Councils and committees men are more dominant speakers, and less good listeners – me included – than their women peers. I am concerned that our Kiddush rota is populated almost entirely by women, and our telephone care scheme and Friendship Club volunteers are almost all women. Our men insist that they must do furniture moving, even if some of our women are fitter and better trained for such work.

In the words of gender stereotype-defying Freddie Mercury - I want to break free. I want us all to challenge ourselves further to nurture in our synagogue fuller equality for the adults, fuller rounded education for all our children.

What wonderful things might happen if we developed emotional literacy in all the children of our community - boys and girls? What if we in our synagogue and in our family homes really encouraged and facilitated boys to trust their

intuition, to pay attention to their emotional and health needs?

What if ten men of our community would commit today to read The Descent of Man and to meet with me and some of our community's women to discuss its four main chapters over the coming four months? Sign up today, if you wish, our first meeting will be on Monday 18th November at 8:00pm.

As Rabbi David said in his sermon last night, who knows what little grain of sand might tip the balance towards good in the world. The work of achieving full equality, an equality that liberates both men and women to fulfill the roles that all can play in society, is not going to be completed in our lifetimes. But wouldn't it be good to make progress? Rabbi Tarfon said, nearly two thousand years ago, and it's still valid now: Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, v'lo atah ben chorin l'hibateil mimena - We will not finish the work, but we are not excused from playing our part. Let's go on a life and equality-affirming journey for all of us together.