



**SERMON EREV ROSH HASHANAH 5777:
RETURNING AND NOT RETURNING**

Gabriel Webber, Sunday 2 October 2016
Eastbourne Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 I passed my driving test in June. And driving has opened my eyes to quite how hypocritical I am. For example: when I'm driving along and another car is sticking out of a side-road, trying to cut through and turn right, I feel annoyed and think, "What are you playing at? It's my right of way. You're supposed to wait 'til there's a gap." But when I'm trying to turn right out of a side-road, it's a different story. That's something I've discovered about myself this year. That's something I'm contemplating as I enter 5777.

- 2 I'm not the first person to come into Rosh Hashanah with thoughts such as these. A Chassidic story¹ tells of a Jewish businessman who found that his black coat and black hat made it impossible for him to form business relationships. So he took to wearing an ordinary suit when travelling. Come the High Holy Days, he reflected on his behaviour and felt bad. He went to his rabbi, dressed in his business clothes, and confessed: "I've been a hypocrite. This is how I dress when I'm working in Paris and Leipzig, so I shouldn't try to deceive you by wearing Chassidic clothes at home." The rabbi replied, "I knew that you dressed differently in Paris and Leipzig... but I

thought that here you showed us your true self, and there you were the hypocrite.”

- 3 The story doesn't tell us what happened next, but I like to think that the businessman realised the rabbi was right (always a good ending to any story!) and that, even though he'd built himself up in his mind to be a totally different person, underneath he was actually still just him. What a perfect Rosh Hashanah realisation that would have been: completing another cycle, returning to the starting-point as kind-of-but-not-quite the same person.
- 4 Physically, of course, true return is impossible. Right now I'm standing still – but not staying in the same place, because, obviously, Planet Earth is rotating. But if I stand still for 24 hours, give Earth time to spin a full 360 degrees, will I have returned to the same place? No, because it also orbits the sun. How about if I come back here, to this room, on Monday 2 October 2017, after a full year's orbit of the sun? Still no cigar. The sun also orbits: the whole Milky Way galaxy is spinning. It only completes a revolution after 230 million years.² We can come back to the same places time after time... except, in a way, we can't. Space and gravity and nature relentlessly whizz us along. When still, we're moving; when returning, we're departing.
- 5 And I also wonder what 'we' even means in this context. Our bodies are made out of cells, and those cells are constantly being replaced.

Dr Jonas Friesen, a stem cell biologist in Stockholm, estimates that the human body replaces almost all of its cells over a period of seven to 10 years.³ That always disconcerts me: my arm is made of entirely different stuff to what it was in 2006. I've had this arm all my life... except, in a way, I haven't.

- 6 It's appropriate to ponder these things at Rosh Hashanah, because a big theme of Judaism's new year is not just celebration but teshuvah, which means 'returning'... except, in a way, it doesn't, because however hard we atone for all the things we've done wrong over the last year, our atonement will not return us to September 2015. The last 12 months will still have happened. I'll still be a qualified driver. Victoria Wood and Ronnie Corbett won't come back to life. All the political tumult of this year will still have happened.
- 7 But this point in the cycle – the end of one year and the beginning of another – is still a return of sorts, not just to the month of Tishri and apples and honey, but to the thinking-space that the theme of teshuvah gives us.
- 8 That thinking space is not exclusive to the High Holy Days. It's not as if we can only contemplate the direction of our lives in this brief 10-day period starting at Rosh Hashanah and ending at Yom Kippur. But we tend not to do so at other times. It's just like how, every Pesach, I remember how much I enjoy the hard-boiled egg in

salt water and think to myself, “I can actually have this any time I want” – but I tend not to.

- 9 Perhaps we're just seasonal creatures. We work in cycles. And every time we hit this part of the cycle, it's a reminder on our Jewish to-do list to reflect.
- 10 Granted, our act of teshuvah, our returning, won't function as some cosmic 'undo' feature rewinding us to 2015... except, in a way, it will. I won't return to being unable to drive, but I aim to be a less hypocritical driver going forward.⁴ Some of Britain's most treasured comedians and performers will still be departed, but we can appreciate anew the joy they brought to our lives. The astonishing political events of 2016 will still have happened, for better or for worse – but we can resolve to make it 'for better', and to use the situation in which we find ourselves to make our society the fairest and most just it has ever been.
- 11 The rabbis of the Talmud decreed that all Jews should calculate for themselves the cycles of nature and of astronomy – “because that will be [our] proof of wisdom and discernment to other peoples”.⁵
- 12 The current thinking is that this requirement was intended to aid predictions of the weather.⁶ But it might just as well apply to a duty on us as 21st century Jews, to pause, stop and reflect; to calculate the cycles of our own nature; to plot where we've come from and where we're going; how we've changed and how we're the same;

whether we're really the person who wears the business suit, or the person who wears the Chassidic clothes; how we're returning and how we're not returning; and how we want to be as we go round the wheel once more, into the year ahead. Kein y'hi ratzon: may that be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GW 02.10.16

¹ <http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/69106/jewish/Hypocrisy.htm>

² <<http://hypertextbook.com/facts/2002/StacyLeong.shtml>>

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/02/science/your-body-is-younger-than-you-think.html?_r=0>

⁴ Pardon the pun (I decided against using a tortuous extended metaphor of going forward vs reversing vs three-point turns)

⁵ Shabbat 75a, quoting Deuteronomy 4:6

⁶ Roman A Ohrenstein and Barry L J Gordon, *Economic Analysis in Talmudic Literature: Rabbinic Thought in the Light of Modern Economics* (3rd ed.), Leiden, 2009: p 65