

'TO GIVE YOU A FUTURE AND A HOPE'

Kol Nidrey: there is no other moment that compares to the enveloping enchantment of this sacred service. From the first minutes of silence, accompanied only by the faint tinkling of the bells of the *rimonim* that adorn the *Torah* scrolls, through the haunting inflections of *Kol Nidrey* and the other special *Yom Kippur* melodies, to the rousing rendition of *Avinu Malkeinu* in front of the open Ark a few moments ago. Our gathering this evening, pulses with the accumulated heartbeats of all the generations, who went before us on our people's annual sacred pilgrimage towards Atonement. And yet, we have not stepped back in time. The *Hebrew* date may be the same as the date first mentioned in the *Torah*: the 10th day of the seventh month,¹ but the other calendar that regulates our lives tells us that today is the October 11, 2016. Of course, every generation of Jews throughout millennia has observed this sacred moment in the context of their own particular time and place. And so, like the generations before us, we have brought with us this evening, our experiences of the past year, and our memories of everything that has happened since we last gathered together on *Kol Nidrey*; the special moments and challenges, milestones and losses we have experienced and witnessed in our own personal lives, within our congregation, and our other communities, and in the wider society.

So, how do we negotiate our lives as Jews in Britain in the 21st century for the sake of a Jewish future in this nexus between the complex legacies of the past we carry with us and the challenges of the present that confront us?

As we ponder this question, let me take you back to a particular time in living memory and share with you the sermon delivered by Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck, the leader of German Jewry, on *Kol Nidrey* in Germany in 1935:²

In this hour all Israel stands before God, the judge and the forgiver. In God's presence, let us all examine our ways, our deeds, and what we have failed to do.

Where we transgressed, let us openly confess: 'We have sinned!' And, determined to return to God, let us pray: 'Forgive us.'

We stand before our God.

With the same fervour with which we confess our sins, the sins of the individual and the sins of the community, do we, in indignation and abhorrence, express our contempt for the lies concerning us and the defamation of our religion and its testimonies.

We have trust in our faith and in our future.

Who made known to the world the mystery of the Eternal, the One God?

Who imparted to the world the comprehension of purity of conduct and purity of family life?

Who taught the world respect for humanity, created in the image of God?

Who spoke of the commandment of righteousness, of social justice?

In all this were seen manifest the spirit of the prophets, the divine revelation to the Jewish people. It grew out of our Judaism and is still growing. By these facts we repel the insults flung at us.

We stand before our God. On God we rely. From God issues the truth and the glory of our history, our fortitude amidst all change of fortune, our endurance in distress.

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Our history is a history of nobility of soul, of human dignity. It is history we have recourse to when attack and grievous wrong are directed against us, when affliction and calamity befall us.

God has led our ancestors from generation to generation. God will guide us and our children through these days.

We stand before our God, strengthened by God’s commandment that we fulfil. We bow to God and stand upright before people. We worship God and remain firm in all vicissitudes. Humbly we trust in God and our path lies clear before us; we see our future.

All Israel stands before her God in this hour. In our prayers, in our hope, in our confession, we are one with all Jews on earth. We look upon each other and know who we are; we look up to our God and know what shall abide.

‘Behold, the One that keeps Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps’ (Psalm 121:4).

‘May the One who makes peace in the heights bring peace upon us and upon all Israel.’

Germany in 1935: Let us imagine for a moment what it was like for the German Jewish community at that time. And yet, Leo Baeck had the courage and the conviction to offer these words of hope, and comfort his congregation as they stood on the brink of the abyss. Rabbi Baeck’s defiant declaration on that *Kol Nidrey* in 1935 precipitated his arrest. For most of the Nazi period, he was incarcerated in Theresienstadt, where he continued to preach and teach. Leo Baeck survived the *Sho’ah*. One of his students at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin, literally, the ‘High School for the Science of Judaism’,³ where he taught, who became the first and only woman rabbi, when she was ordained that year on December 27, 1935 did not survive. Rabbi Regina Jonas was deported to Theresienstadt in November 1942, where in addition to working with the psychologist Viktor Frankl to help new arrivals adapt to life in the ghetto, she also gave sermons and lectures. In October 1944, she was sent to Auschwitz.⁴

Like many German Jewish survivors, including several rabbis, Leo Baeck came to England after the war. For Rabbi Baeck, England was not simply a refuge. The existence of a Jewish community that not been decimated by the *Sho’ah*, also held out the hope for a Jewish future – a future denied to six million Jews and to tens of thousands of Jewish communities on the continent of Europe. One of Leo Baeck’s colleagues, Rabbi Werner van der Zyl, took the initiative in establishing a new progressive rabbinical college as the successor of the *Hochschule*, which had been closed down by the Nazis in 1942. Dedicated to ensuring the revival of Jewish life and learning after the *Sho’ah*, the Jewish Theological College, as it was first called was established in 1956. When Leo Baeck died two months later in November 1956, the college was renamed Leo Baeck College in his memory.⁵ All the lecturers were refugees and survivors. Most of them rabbis, they also included Ellen Littman, a *Hochschule* classmate of Rabbi Regina Jonas, who taught Bible. When it first opened its doors at West London Synagogue, Leo Baeck College had just two students, Lionel Blue and Michael Leigh. With an expanding student body, the college moved to its own premises at the Manor House in Finchley, north London in 1981, and in the past 60 years since it was established, 184 rabbis have been ordained under the auspices of Leo Baeck College.⁶ During the first 19 years, all the ordinands were men. And then in 1975, Rabbi Jackie Tabick became the first woman rabbi in Britain. Since that significant milestone, 54 more women rabbis have been ordained⁷ – including, me in 1989, together with Rabbi Sheila Shulman – *Zichronah livrachah*, may her memory be for blessing – who sadly, died in 2014, shortly after we celebrated the 25th anniversary of our ordinations.

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To mark the 40th anniversary of the ordination of Rabbi Jackie Tabick and the 80th anniversary of the ordination of Rabbi Regina Jonas, my colleague, Rabbi Dr Barbara Borts, and I co-edited, *Women Rabbis in the Pulpit – A collection of sermons*, which was published last December.⁸ The book includes 45 contributors, and paying tribute to these important 40th and 80th anniversaries, also reveals a succession of other ‘firsts’. The second woman rabbi in Britain, Rabbi Julia Neuberger, ordained in 1977, became the first woman rabbi to lead a solo pulpit in Britain, South London Liberal Synagogue. When she was ordained in 1981, Rabbi Borts became the first woman rabbi to lead a solo Reform pulpit in Britain. In 1989, I became the first lesbian rabbi to lead a mainstream congregation, and a year later, Rabbi Sheila Shulman, z”l, founded the first inclusive synagogue in Britain, *Beit Klal Yisrael*. In 2004, Rabbi Alexandra Wright, ordained in 1986, became the first woman to become Senior Rabbi of a congregation, when she took up that post at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue. In 2011, Rabbi Dr Deborah Kahn Harris, ordained in 1996, became the first female Principal of Leo Baeck College.

The motto of Leo Baeck College is ‘to give you a future and hope’. The phrase is derived from a verse from the Book of Jeremiah (29:11): “‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Eternal One, ‘plans for peace, and not for evil, in order to give you a future and a hope – lateit la-chem acharit v’tikvah.’” When we think of what has been achieved in the past 60 years since the college was established, of the leadership that Leo Baeck College has provided concerning gender equality, and of how many congregations in this country have been invigorated by the post-*Sho’ah* generation of rabbis, we can surely say that Leo Baeck College has given the Jewish community in Britain ‘a future and hope’.

While several Leo Baeck College graduates serve Jewish congregations all over the world, jointly sponsored by both Liberal Judaism and the Movement for Reform Judaism, the focus of rabbinic training is on providing rabbis for our home-grown progressive congregations. And not only rabbis: From the outset, the college was committed to the training of teachers, and in addition to certificate and diploma programmes, in the 1990s, the college began to offer degrees in Jewish education, as well as degrees in Hebrew and Jewish studies. Several of our congregation’s religion schoolteachers received teaching certificates from Leo Baeck College, and our own Andy Cable studied at LBC for the certificate, then the diploma and then the MA in Jewish Education. For many years, the college has also been open to members of progressive congregations to follow ad hoc classes and courses, and to attend the weekly *Shiur*, which focuses on the study of the *Torah* portion. More recently, two years ago, the college established the *Lehrhaus* to encourage in-depth adult Jewish education. The *Lehrhaus*, meaning ‘House of Study’ in German, is a tribute to the German Jewish roots of Leo Baeck College and the traditions of modern Jewish scholarship established by institutions such as the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Since 2014, the *Lehrhaus* has offered 16 different courses, including study in Bible, Talmud, philosophy, Biblical Hebrew, Midrash, sacred music, and Jews and art, which have attracted around 120 participants⁹ – and yes, this is an advertisement!

When Rabbi Leo Baeck spoke on *Kol Nidrey* in 1935 and said ‘we see our future’, he demonstrated the vision to see beyond the time of terror that he knew was at hand. This evening, on *Kol Nidrey*, as we pay tribute to Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck and congratulate the Leo Baeck College, we are challenged to make our own contribution to ensuring that Jewish life in this country continues to have *acharit v’tikvah*, ‘a future and a hope’ – not least, by making a donation to the Leo Baeck College, which as you are aware is one of the recipients of this year’s *Kol Nidrey* Appeal. We are also challenged to make our contribution by engaging in Jewish life and learning ourselves. A few minutes ago, I posed a question: How do we negotiate our lives as Jews in Britain in the 21st century for the sake of a Jewish future in this nexus between the complex legacies of the past we carry with us and the challenges of the present that confront us? There are no simple answers. Each one of us must find our own responses. But let us be

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clear about one thing: how we choose to respond, how we manage this negotiation matters, just as our individual lives matter. Contrary to a popular assumption, the possibility of a Jewish future does not rest on having Jewish children. Every Jewish child must find their own way. The possibility of a Jewish future is *in our hands*. The possibility of a Jewish future depends on what we do – each and every one of us – to enable Jewish life *to live in our lives*, shaped by our concerns and our priorities. A Jewish future becomes possible when in our search for meaning and purpose for our lives today, we interrogate the texts and traditions bequeathed to us with our own questions and experiences.

Let me remind you of what Rabbi Leo Baeck said to his congregation towards the end of his sermon on that *Kol Nidrey* in 1935: ‘All Israel stands before her God in this hour. In our prayers, in our hope, in our confession, we are one with all Jews on earth. We look upon each other and know who we are; we look up to our God and know what shall abide.’ As we begin our journey towards Atonement this *Kol Nidrey* in 2016, may the example of the vision and courage of Leo Baeck be a source of inspiration, and may the words he spoke in very different circumstances encourage us to embrace our people and our heritage with pride, and look towards the future with hope.

And let us say: Amen.

Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah

Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

Erev Yom Kippur 5777 – 11th October 2016

¹ Leviticus 23:27.

² See: *Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship*, Volume 3. *Prayers for the High Holy Days*. Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, London, 1985, p. 799.

³ The *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* was established in Berlin in 1872.

⁴ See: Fräulein Rabbiner Regina Jonas and the Mysterious Disappearance of the First Woman Rabbi, which is chapter 4 of *Trouble-Making Judaism* by Elli Tikvah Sarah (David Paul Books, 2012)

⁵ See: <http://www.lbc.ac.uk/history.html>

⁶ See: List, ‘Rabbinic Graduates by Ordination Year’ (Leo Baeck College, unpublished document).

⁷ See: List, ‘Women Rabbis ordained under the auspices of Leo Baeck College’ (*Women Rabbis in the Pulpit*, pp. 352-354).

⁸ Kulmus Publications, 2015.

⁹ <http://www.lbc.ac.uk/Leo-Baeck-College-Lehrhaus-2014-to-2015/leo-baeck-college-lehrhaus-2014-2015-home-of-jewish-learning.html>