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SHABBAT BERESHIT 5772

Sermon delivered by Rabbi Michael Hilton, Kol Chai Hatch End Jewish Community

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"And you shall love your neighbour as yourself." Rabbi Akiva says, This is a great principle in the Torah. Ben Azzai says "This is the book of the generations of Adam" (Genesis 5: 1) - this is an even greater principle. (Sifra on Leviticus 19: 18)

We have Ben Azzai's text on our Torah reading this morning: **זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדוֹת אָדָם** *Zeh sefer toledot Adam*. What does Ben Azzai mean when he calls it a great principle, greater even than loving your neighbour? What kind of principle is this?

Who was Ben Azzai? We heard his name just two weeks ago, one of the ten martyrs whose names we read out on Yom Kippur, victims of the persecution of the Emperor Hadrian. He, Rabbi Akiva, and others of their generation, were astonishingly astute scholars. Though only a remnant preserved and passed on the knowledge of Torah, nevertheless they promoted a Judaism which was no longer just a tribal religion, but a faith which has conquered centuries, with deeply moral first principles. "This is the book of the generations of Adam." It means, surely, that this Torah is a book for everyone; and because *toledot*, "generations" is the Hebrew for history, it means that this book is everyone's history.

Our text continues: "When God created humankind, in the image of God he created them." When we add this, it becomes easier to draw out from the text a principle of behaviour. If we are all made in the image of God, every human life is of equal value and equally deserving of respect. There it is, a principle stated at the very start of the Torah, and yet it still seems as if the world has not yet learned it.

The other day, I attended a briefing given by Harriet Lamb, the Executive Director of the Fair Trade Foundation. She is a truly remarkable person, the main person responsible for growing Fair Trade from a fringe group to mainstream. She told us how she managed to persuade Cadbury's to adopt Fair Trade. She took some of their management to meet farmers who produce cocoa for them in Ghana, just to meet and talk. The farmers talked about their future. They said none of their children were going into cocoa farming. Nobody wanted to do it, because the rewards were so small; one farmer said all his sons had left for the city, and he was worried they would end up in a life of crime. Cadbury's came to realise that if they didn't do something to improve the farmer's lot, the next generation of cocoa farmers just wouldn't be there. They were persuaded to think long term.

The detailed way Fair Trade operates is complicated. Setting a fair price is only part of it. The farmer's have to form a democratic committee to manage the fair trade premium, and have to decide how to spend it – not for themselves, but for community projects. It takes a lot of persuading to get the farmers on board, the companies the supermarkets and the consumers. It is of course, not a perfect system and like any payment system, there is the

possibility of corruption. But as Harriet Lamb put it to us “It’s not a stamp of perfection, it’s a mechanism for change.” It sets a standard which is higher. Today 38% of all bananas sold in this country are Fair Trade. Harriet is aiming for 50% and higher. What motivates her? In 1997 she visit Costa Rica and Met a woman called Maria, whose husband worked on the banana plantations. She had given birth to a baby boy with severe abnormalities – eyes and nose joined together, head four times bigger than his body. He – but was just one of 3,500 Costa Rican children with such deformities. The problem was a pesticide called pesticide called DBCP, banned in the US, but still in use in Costa Rica. It sounds as if Harriet has been fighting Maria’s cause ever since. But Fair Trade only works because people want it—people buy fair trade because they do not really want food that has been produced by what amounts to little more than slave labour. None of us wants that.

At our discussion on Yom Kippur, there was talk about forming a Social Action group at Kol Chai. It is time to stand up and be counted. As Hillel said; “If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And *if not now, when?*” Let’s get together and decide what causes we want to support and get out there and do something. Let’s also come along on Mitzvah Day and join in our projects for helping others and our environment. We have the backing of our Kol Chai better group, which this week set social action as one of its aims. As we begin to read our Torah, we are reminded that its principles commit us to one humanity. As the prophet Malachi put it,¹ “Have we not all one father? Did not one God create us?” Or as our haftarah today adds;² “to make blind eyes see, to bring those bound in chains out of the dungeon, those that sit in darkness out of prison.”

¹ Malachi 2:10

² Isaiah 42:7