

Saturday 30th April 2016

ACHAREI-MOT 5776

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

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The most moving moment of my week came as a surprise. I was on my way home from Kol Chai on Tuesday afternoon and listening to the PM programme on Radio 4. The news was of the verdict at the inquest into the 96 people who died at Hillsborough Football Stadium in Sheffield April 1989. The reporting was not just about the facts, but about people's feelings. And one word kept being repeated time and time again. The word was love. The Hillsborough families were people who loved each other, loved their families, loved and missed those who died, families who had cared and looked after those who were injured. In Liverpool, it was the Hillsborough disaster which brought people together. After centuries of rivalry between Catholic and Protestant, after the disaster, the world first witnessed the Church of England and the Catholic Church, the Bishop and the Archbishop, standing side by side. Since that time, as those of us who know Liverpool and its people can bear witness, the city has had an incredibly strong community feel, as strong as you will find anywhere. I myself witnessed the togetherness in 1997, when The Catholic Archbishop of the time (David Warlocke) read from the Bible standing (by chance) right next to me in a very full Anglican Cathedral, assembled for the retirement of Bishop David Sheppard. It was a moment I shall never forget. It was as if Rabbi Bergson from Pinner shul had come to Kol Chai and read from the Torah in our synagogue: it seemed momentous, a huge act of friendship and reconciliation. But that's how Liverpool is, how it has become.

What I heard on the news report on Tuesday was that at the very time when football supporters were being crushed to death in the overcrowded Hillsborough stadium, a false narrative was being constructed, the one which many of us read and heard at the time, that Liverpool supporters without tickets had forced their way into the ground. On top of that statement, now known to be a lie, further myths were constructed about drunkenness and irresponsible behaviour, and these myths have persisted for all these years even though there was plenty of TV footage from the day which didn't pick it up. Why was this possible, asked the BBC reporter? It was something about what people thought of football supporters, what people thought of Liverpool, and of course putting the two together, what they thought of Liverpool football supporters.

One of those featured on the news programme was Trevor Hicks, who lost his two daughters, who wasn't living in Liverpool at all but here in Hatch End. Three years ago I heard him speak at Middlesex New Synagogue, telling the told us the horrific story of how he lost both his daughters, aged 19 and 15 among the Liverpool supporters who died on that fateful day. One of the many things that went wrong

was the police publicising the full names and addresses of those who died. Because not so many of them had London addresses, and because the media then as now were mainly based in London, Trevor and his wife found the next morning, after a sleepless night, an army of journalists and photographers camped outside their door. It was three days before they could leave the cul-de-sac where they lived.

In this world, the search for reconciliation demands justice, and the search for peace of mind after trauma demands truth. Sometimes the plight and the fight can go on for years, as organisations and public bodies become defensive. This week's Torah section has a timely title "Acharei mot", which means "after death". Aaron's two sons had apparently done something wrong – but who knows, maybe that too was a false narrative written after the event to try to explain their deaths. But the follow up to the story comes this week, as their father Aaron is instructed in a ritual of atonement. Two goats are to be taken, one for a sin offering and one for Azazel – one to be burned on the altar, one allowed to escape into the wilderness, the original "scapegoat." This ritual became the centre of the huge Yom Kippur ceremonies in ancient times, and we still read about the details and remember it in our Musaf service every Yom Kippur to this day. But our machzor does not explore the link our Torah makes between the instructions for the ceremony and the death of Aaron's two sons. The midrash explains that Nadav and Avihu had died because they came "too near to God" and therefore Aaron is here told not to enter the holiest part of the sanctuary. A simple explanation. But psychologically it's much more complicated than that. It is well known that survivors often feel guilty for having survived when others have died: rituals of grieving and atonement (literally becoming "at one" with God) can help. Two people are at a football match: one dies, one survives. Lots are cast on two goats: one dies the other is set free: the difference being that with the goats, it is done deliberately as a ritual, a kind of sympathetic magic through which the guilt of the survivor, in this case Aaron, can be cleansed. There were no inquests or committees of enquiries in ancient times, but they knew something in those days we often forget: that public acknowledgement helps. May this weekend and the coming months be a time of healing for those who suffered at Hillsborough: and may the police and others who are left feeling they should have done so much more, may they get the help they need too, for it would be wrong to offer comfort to the survivors by scapegoating another group. The need for penance after bloodshed is also the theme of our haftarah this morning, from Ezekiel 22; "Thus says the Lord God: A city which sheds blood within itself; its time has come..You have become guilty by the blood that you have shed" But in the end this great denouncer of Israel came to preach the message of repentance: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." That's how the Hillsborough families are feeling this weekend; may they find comfort not only through each other, but through their renewed hope in the system of justice with which they have struggled for so long.

