

Saturday 14th September 2013

YOM KIPPUR MORNING 5774

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

© Michael Hilton 2013

Last night I spoke about happiness, and touched on the subject of the happiness that can come from giving. In the book of Proverbs we find (14: 21) *The one who despises his neighbour sins: but the one who is gracious to the poor, happy is he.* In the words of Torah we are about to read (Leviticus 19:18) *You shall love your neighbour as you love yourself. I am Adonai.* But who is our neighbour? How far do our responsibilities extend? Is the neighbour the person who lives next door, or someone I know personally, or is it everyone? Who is my neighbour?

A few months ago I was on a bus where the driver was unable to issue tickets because the printer wasn't working. An elderly man with a white stick got on, paid his fare in cash, and held out his hand for his ticket. The driver explained that he could not issue one, but the man stood there holding out his hand, demanding his ticket. It appeared that he had little money and was able to claim back the cost – but not without the ticket. He stood his ground and driver got annoyed. Eventually he picked up the cash the man had paid, threw it down on the counter and shouted at the man “Get off my bus and never get on it again!” The man got off and the bus continued its journey. Everyone on the bus could see the incident. None of us did anything to help – we didn't want to get involved. Afterwards I wrote a letter to my London Assembly member, but I didn't really get a satisfactory reply. Was this man my neighbour? Surely yes. Did I love him and help him? I didn't!

I am pretty certain that the bus driver would not have behaved like that if the passenger had been someone he knew. We do after all help our neighbours if we know them. The street we live in is a cul-de sac with around fifty houses, some of which are split into flats. There must be at least 150 people who live in the road. Can we know all the neighbours in our street? Not easily, but with the help a few good people who do a lot of work organising, we have a good stab at it. We often invite the street to our sukkah, we have a joint Chanukah/ Christmas party in the street each year, we had a street party last year for the diamond Jubilee, there's a wine and cheese evening coming up – all these events open to anyone who lives in the street. There is absolutely no doubt that as a result of getting to know your neighbours, people become more helpful to each other, helping when people are ill, and many other little things. Which is lovely, but reinforces my thinking that we think of our neighbours as people we know.

To the rabbis, “love your neighbour” has had a very definite meaning “love your fellow Jew” Rabbi Akiva called it a great principle of the Torah. (Sifra on Leviticus 19:18) But Ben Azzai said there is an even greater principle in the book of Genesis, where it says (5:1) *This is the book of the generations of Adam.* Ben Azzai is saying

that the Torah is not only about how Jews should treat their fellow-Jews, but there is more to it, lessons applicable to the wider world. We have to apply the principle of “loving our neighbour” more widely, to cover non-Jews too, and not just people we happen to know.

The one who saves a single life, teaches the Mishnah, *it is as if he has saved the whole world*. (Sanhedrin 4:5) Benedict Roth (*Jewish Chronicle*, 19 April 2012) has charted the history of this little saying, and how at some point in the middle ages the manuscripts got changed, and the saying became *Someone who saves a single Jewish life, it is as if he has saved the whole world*. The Jewish world at that time looked in on itself, and limited the application of the saying. In the same way, love your neighbour became love your fellow Jew and *love the stranger* (Leviticus 19: 34) was taken to mean “Love the convert.” I’m sure that wasn’t what it meant originally.

After our Torah readings we shall hear the great and wonderful statement on this by the prophet Isaiah, where he tells us the true fast is not about self-denial but helping others, breaking the yoke, sharing food with the hungry, letting the oppressed go free. Was he only talking about the Jewish hungry and oppressed? Indeed he was, for the text says (57:7) *Do not hide from your own flesh and blood*. But he was preaching to a Jewish audience in a Jewish society – for us in an open society with many different faiths it is different. “Who is my Neighbour” is the theme for the 2014 Ammerdown three faiths encounter week, which I shall be helping to organise and teach next summer. In our High Holyday prayer book, on pages 952 to 955 we have four full pages of comments on ‘loving your neighbour’. I commend them to your attention and we shall look at some of them in our study session this afternoon.

The United Synagogue Chief Rabbi, Efraim Mirvis, pointed out in his installation address that Jerusalem was destroyed because of *sinat chinam*, hatred without cause. He went on to say that there is another, less talked about, rabbinic concept, *ahavat chinam* love without cause: at this season of the year we are called upon to judge each other favourably, to be especially careful in our dealings with other people. With these words he did extend a hand of special friendship to all of us, his fellow Jews “We have suffered damage from totally unnecessary communal infighting and illwill – we cannot make peace in the world if we are squabbling amongst ourselves.” He expressed his view that our duties to our neighbour extend to those of other faiths, for we are all made in the image of God. With this in mind, I’d like to conclude with a poem by Ulrich Shaffer, who attended our last Ammerdown faiths encounter week, and I am grateful to Pearl Simons for sending this to me:

And don’t foregt to dream,
To imagine a world
In which love gets more space
In which hope does not end
And in which peace – Salaam, Shalom
Is the very deep desire
Of all human beings

The ability to dream is a gift
Your energy is waiting to be taken up and used by your dream
Stand up for what you believe for your dreams are your dreams and only you can
realise them.

May we go forth from here today inspired to love more deeply, to care more deeply,
to act more energetically, to improve our own lives and the lives of others, to love
each other and our world more fully