

Drashah BeHa'alotecha AGK 16.06.22

Where is the light, these days?

A cruel war, growing numbers of refugees and hungry people, the climate catastrophe. Accusations, innuendos, bad mouthing, fake news. Negative news all around us. We have difficulty seeing light.

*We are counting.* We are counting the days since the war against the Ukraine broke out, exactly three month, three weeks, and three days ago – today. A courageous people, a courageous president, fighting for their identity, fighting to survive. Sounds familiar to us? What keeps them alive? What kept, and keeps us alive?

*We have been counting.* Forty years of hardship and wondering through the desert. An endless list of disasters. No meat, no fish, no real sustenance. Insurrections, revolutions, a desperate people, a desperate leader. What kept us alive? Is there a light during these times of anxiety and fear, of hunger and exhaustion, then and now? Light, even in the darkest of times? We have *been counting 49 days* from our narrow escape out of Egyptian slavery, seven weeks till we arrived at the foot of Mount Sinai, amid light and thunder; and there it came, Moses brought it down, Torah and Tradition - a written text and an oral explanation. We all stood there, men, women, children. We heard and saw it. It became our *compass* ever since. It has never been and never will be easy to hold on to that compass, which we received on that mountain in the desert, in no-mans-land, and thus accessible to us and to all humanity, as Jewish tradition likes to stress.

In our Parashah we are already in the middle of the practical details of how to give concrete content to the lofty ideals of the Ten essential sayings Moses received on Sinai. It talks about the *Menorah*, the lampstand which must be hammered out of Gold, from top to bottom. The word used for hammering out is *mikshah*, from the same root as the Hebrew word *kasheh*, difficult. It implies it was a great deal of hard labour and effort to make this lampstand for the *Mishkan*, the desert Sanctuary, for the Tent of meeting, the *Ohel Mo'ed*. The Menorah symbolises the light of learning and insight. This Menorah can only be made *mikshah*, the hard way. The light of Torah cannot be diffused by a switch. That is why our *chachamim*, our sages urge all of us to be *amolim baTorah*, to be prepared to labour arduously in the study of Torah and Tradition. Only then, the hard way, the Menorah can become a *Ner tamid*, an eternal light. We know we must work hard for that, just as our ancestors, our teachers did all the millennia before. We are proud of them; they must have done something right, otherwise we wouldn't sit here now.

Abraham Geiger College offers the only Liberal, Progressive rabbinical education in Germany and together with Leo Baeck College, London, it is one of only two such institutions in Europe. Our training is internationally oriented: Women and men from a large range of countries enrol in our program at the School of Jewish Theology in Potsdam University.

Since 2006 the College has ordained and invested 31 rabbis and 10 cantors. By the end of this year, they will be joined by an additional 9 rabbis and cantors. Almost all graduates

successfully serve Progressive communities and *Einheitsgemeinden*, Conservative and LGBTIQ+ synagogues worldwide, in Europe, Israel, Great Britain, North and South America, and South Africa.

They all are familiar with the different movements of Judaism. But they are also aware of what academic studies have long indicated: Most Jews, unfamiliar with Judaism, are primarily in search of their identity. This applies equally to Jews from the former Soviet Union and to Jews who were born Jewish yet don't consider themselves religious, but also to Jews who do not feel at home in established communities, for whatever reason. This is a worldwide phenomenon – and it is precisely in addressing these issues and communities that our rabbis and cantors are succeeding, whether they were trained at Leo Baeck College in London, at HUC in New York, Los Angeles, and Jerusalem, or at Abraham Geiger College.

Our graduates are post-denominational: progressive and egalitarian, and at the same time tradition-based, they are able to demonstrate the relevance of our core texts – the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinic sources – for the present. Our cantors are familiar with classical chazzanut, with Hasidic-inspired music and modern Israeli songs.

Some of our rabbis may personally be more observant than the members of their congregations, but they don't impose these rules on others; rather, they encourage people to make their own choices. They know their Jewish sources well enough to engage in a fruitful exchange with their communities and discuss the major issues of our time: social justice, climate, and peace.

Visiting the synagogues of our students and graduates, and studying their community programs, these synagogues are true community centres in the traditional meaning of the word: places where Jews meet socially (Bet haKnesset), where they learn classically as in a Bet Midrash, and where they also sing and pray together. This is the contemporary form of Judaism for which we stand. Abraham Geiger College is of essential importance for the future of Liberal Judaism in Germany and Central Europe and the institution is and will remain greatly committed to our students, graduates, and the entire Jewish community, worldwide.

Nobody says it is easy to keep the light of the *Menorah* burning, but we do everything we can to listen to what you say, to keep that vision of our ancestors alive and relevant for tomorrow's generation. Just as God spoke after the *aseret ha-dvarim*, the Ten Words: “In every place where I cause my Name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you” (Exodus 20,21).

So, where is the light these days? The prophet Zechariah shows it in today's Haftarah. The light comes “not by might, not by power, but by my spirit. ... O great mountain, turn into flat ground! It shall produce that excellent stone; it shall be greeted with shouts of `beautiful, beautiful`” (4, 6-7).

A happy home is fashioned *mikshah*, the hard way. It requires patience, sympathy, and tolerance.

Rabbi Edward van Voolen