

## **Erev RH GIL 2024/5785**

### **Rabbi Nathan Alfred**

Firstly, I would like to say what a pleasure it is to be here with you in the GIL tonight and to be celebrating our first New Year together. Rosh Hashanah is first and foremost a celebration. Despite everything, we are here. Life continues, and the world keeps spinning.

I would like to thank all of you for the warm welcome that you have given to me, to my wife Shelly and to our son, Noam.

I would especially like to thank Rabbi Francois, now the rabbi emeritus, a title that is hard-earned after more than fifty years working as the rabbi of the GIL. Thank you Francois for entrusting me with the sacred task of replacing you and continuing your work, and for giving me the space to find my own space in this community.

Of course I want to thank the Committee and the Members of the community for their support and warm welcome too. As you know, it takes a village to raise a child but it's lesser-known that it also takes a community to engage a rabbi. We are just getting started in terms of what we can do together.

And if we didn't meet yet, then maybe you're a twice a year Jew. That's ok and I hope to see you again at Kippur! But of course I would be very happy to meet you after that too – don't be shy to make an appointment with me so that we can begin to get to know each other.

We have been here nine months – and many people ask me: how do you find Geneva? Do you like it here? Are you settling in?

Naturally acclimatisation is more of a process than a moment. But I want to share one moment in my process of becoming Genevois – something akin to both a conversion in the mikveh and a baptism of fire. It happened six weeks ago, at the Stade de Geneve, at the moment when Servette scored their winning goal against my football team, Chelsea. All of a sudden I found myself drenched and drowning in the liquid that was being flung around in joy, my shirt and hair wet with Swiss beer. And then, too late, I realized what the masked youths were doing standing next to me in their balaclavas, as the fireworks started to fly past my ears and light up the night.

Miba-esh umibamayim – who by fire and who by water? Who by fireworks and who by beer? When the rockets began flying I began to wonder whether it's such a good thing to be tall.

It was a moment of joy.

But it was a moment of joy in a difficult year.

The first prayer that Cantor Sofia sung for us tonight, Ahot Ketana on page 2, tells us to say goodbye to the old year, a year of curses: “Tikleh shana vekil’loteha”

And what a year of curses it has been. We remember all those who were murdered on October 7<sup>th</sup> and since then, those who were injured, and those who have given their lives in defence of Israel. And above all we remember the hostages – and we pray – as we have prayed all year – we pray for their swift and safe return. And we pray at every moment for Shalom – that peace will come between Israel and its neighbours – as we mourn all the innocent victims of war – be they in Israel, Gaza or Lebanon.

It was a year full of curses.

It’s a curse that my wife tells our 5-year old son that at school he’s British, when he’s also Israeli.

It’s a curse that in a playground close to her school, a 10 year old girl in this community was beaten by other girls and called “a dirty Jew”.

It’s a curse that a 13 year old girl, about to celebrate her bat mitzvah here at the GIL, writes that becoming an adult means understanding that you should not practice your paracha on the train to the synagogue, in case someone hears you singing in Hebrew.

And it’s a curse that our Jewish students in the university, here in Geneva and also in Lausanne, tell me about the malaise they feel, when they see Palestinian flags and symbols so frequently on the university campus. This is also a curse.

These are four examples here in Geneva, examples of the year of curses that we have undergone. I am sure that you can add your own.

The phrase is often attributed to Theodor Adorno, that “It is impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz”. In fact, it’s a misquote. It’s not impossible. Rather Adorno said that “it was barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz”.

It is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz. In the same way that it is barbaric for flowers to grow in a field that has been set on fire, or a house on a kibbutz that has been burnt to the ground. It is barbaric for nature to flourish after tragedy and disaster, and yet flourish it must. The flowers will grow again.

The Czech writer Josef Svatopluk Machar has written of how even in a quarry when the stones are removed, nature quickly tries to grow flowers in between the places where the stones have been taken away.

For the Egyptian-born French writer Edmond Jabes, in his work, “the book of Questions”, it is the stones themselves that can strengthen us:

“The strength of the tile is that it is stone. The Jews have taken shelter behind the stones thrown at them. Once turned to dust, they will be part of the stones thrown at their descendants. They know this. You cannot surprise them. They are spellbound by fate. Their strength is their faith in the stone: the stone that makes them bleed and the stone that shelters.”

The flowers will begin to bloom, they will flourish in the quarries. The stones that harmed us will shelter us. The barbaric poetry is already being written, and those of us who are still here are obliged to celebrate the new year. It’s a mitzvah to be happy.

And just as the poem Ahot Ketana says goodbye to the old year and its curses, it says hello to the new year and its blessings. “Tahel shanah uvirchotecha” – that the new year may begin with its blessings.

Because we are a community with strength and resilience, a community full of blessings.

Our children are a blessing.

Back in October we were living in Israel, in Jerusalem. And when the rockets began firing, the sirens wailed, and we had to run to our underground shelter. How to explain to my five-year-old son why we have 90 seconds to run to a shelter?

When we blow the shofar tomorrow, in my mind, it’s the siren I will be hearing.

To explain anti-semitism to a child, at any age, is heart-breaking. To me, being Jewish is a joy, something good, something positive to celebrate.

And yet, our children are resilient. They can understand it – and their understanding is a blessing. And the shofar calls us to remember that strength.

The shofar also calls us to remember the suffering on all sides of this conflict. Isaac and Ishmael are both the sons of Abraham.

Our young people are also a blessing.

After October 7<sup>th</sup> I got several messages from former bar/bat mitzvah students who are now studying on university, especially in the United States. They were shocked by what they were encountering on campus.

As I tried to support them and encourage them from afar, I was disheartened. It struck me that they were not well-prepared as Jewish teenagers to go out into the world. We can certainly prepare them better, but as the days and weeks passed I was happy to see what good kids they are, how they began to organize themselves on campus. As much as it was horrifying to see what they had to endure, I also have faith that that they will come out of this more Jewish than ever. But we must continue to support them.

And our community is a blessing.

In difficult times the community must pull together. Of course we have a spectrum of political beliefs, we each have our opinion about what to do, and what the State of Israel should be doing. It's not my place to tell you what to think. The role of the synagogue is rather to be a safe space where we can come together. There is no answer to the attacks of October 7<sup>th</sup>. But let's be more Jewish than ever. Let's defy all our enemies and continue to be positively Jewish. Come more to the synagogue – not just for prayers but for learning and gathering and all the new activities that we start to offer. Wear your Magen David here with pride. Learn something new. Support each other. Remember Balaam who tried to curse us three times, Balaam with his famous talking donkey. Each time those curses became blessings. May it happen once again this year too.

“Tahel shanah uvirchotecha” – let the new year with its blessings begin!

And may one of these blessings be peace. As Yehuda Amichai put it,

“Let it come

Like wildflowers

Suddenly, because the field

Must have it: wildpeace.”

Like wild, barbaric, flowers – may the new year bring us hope.

And may the new year be sweet and peaceful – l'shana tovah umetouka!