

Erev Rosh HaShana 5761
Transforming the synagogue community

It is 1956, a week before the closing ceremony of the Olympics in Melbourne. The world is in political tumult in the aftermath of the Sinai campaign and especially the Hungarian revolution. Olympic organizers, in light of the politically explosive atmosphere in the Olympic Village wonder how to contain the upcoming closing ceremony. Games chief Wilfrid Kent Hughes receives an anonymous letter from someone who identifies himself as a 17-year-old Chinese boy. He suggests that instead of having single flag-bearers parading behind their national banners, all athletes should stroll together around the arena as one mixed-up, united group. One week later, at the closing ceremony, 100,000 cheering applauding spectators filled the MCG as the athletes walked together en masse – an inspiring spectacle that has been repeated at every Olympic Games since. One small letter changed history – and yet what became of its writer, what was his inspiration and how does that affect us?

This month Wing is in Sydney for the Olympics – and 44 years later, in recognition for his place in history, the main access road to and from the Olympic village has been named the John Ian Wing Parade. At first blush this is a pleasant story about one person's efforts finally being recognised. It calls upon us to think of all those times that someone has done something for us and we have not shown the proper gratitude. It also calls upon us to continue to do our deeds of good whether we receive the proper recognition for them or not. In this sense, the story can be motivational for each of us as we strive to better ourselves and our interactions with others. At the beginning of this New Year we remind ourselves of the teaching of our sages: that the world was created for each of us. In other words, at this time we are meant to celebrate our individual existence and contemplate the meaning and impact of our lives.

But, there is something deeper in the story as well, which is the vision behind John Wing's suggestion. From his parent's home in Melbourne, he used to observe people attending the cinema next door. He was struck by the ordered way in which people would go into the cinema, and how, when they eventually came out they were all mixed up and far more spontaneous and open in their behaviour. Wing intuited the ideal process of becoming a community is the shared experience. Similarly, we have entered from disparate paths and come through our own ticket takers much like a theatrical event. Over these days of the Yamim Noraim, there will be the excitement generated by the crowd, by the sharing of process. For an instant, we will be, just like those attending the Olympics or a movie, a community.

Yet those events form community, but only temporarily. Those events are indeed "one off" events. While Wing noticed the mixing and spontaneity of people leaving the theatre and transposed that to the closing ceremony – this mood does not carry over and create any deeper sense of human or community connection. Perhaps for a few hours people may share a coffee or meal and discuss the movie, or perhaps for a few days and weeks there will be shared stories of the excitement of the closing ceremony – but eventually the buzz wears down and we return to the mundane. In this sense, Rosh Hashanah may not be that much different – people will gather in the courtyard, exchange greetings, we will feel the brief buzz of mix and spontaneity and then go home to our family meals, and the energy will dissipate.

Essentially, only one thing can make this experience more transformative than a movie or any other communal celebration – and that is our intention upon leaving this place in time. While we have entered these premises with many different thoughts, feelings and expectations, it is here and now that we can choose to leave with common intention. We may be touched by music or words, by affect or intellect, but everyone who has arrived today is a bundle of potential energy. Each one of us can make an impact and together we can have even greater effect. We should further remember that a great aspect of the personal meaning in our lives derives from the relationships in which we engage and the community that we build.

These 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are known as the Yamim Noraim or Asseret Yamim Noraim. As the Yamim Noraim, Days of Awe, we think about the limits of our life and how far we can extend within them. As Yamei Teshuva, we think about repentance, that is, a process of review of our personal failures and successes, and how we intend to become whole with our inner self and God, and how to heal with those we have harmed and who have harmed us. Healing of self and relationships are the first, necessary steps to building community.

However, they alone are not sufficient, for we must carry on with positive intentions and actions that build networks. Participating in synagogue life requires us to recall the purpose of the synagogue itself. On one hand it is Beit Tefillah, a house of prayer, and our prayers highlight so many of our values and dreams. For example, we say Shema Yisrael, declaring the unity and interconnectedness of all life. We begin the Amida recalling our avot, our ancestors, and thereby recognise that every Jew, by birth or by choice, shares a common history. The Amida continues with our dreams for healing, redemption and peace. However, these words may not have impact if we have not yet probed them for meaning.

So the synagogue is also Beit Midrash, a house of learning. As we deepen our understanding of Torah in its broadest sense, we gain both self understanding and knowledge as to what it means to be a Jew in the contemporary world, descendants of Avraham and Sarah, yet also the ones responsible for presenting this teaching to the generations to come. However, learning does not just come from a text, but from another human being, and the interaction among us is crucial in the formation of community.

The synagogue is thus a Beit Keneset, its name in Hebrew, a house of gathering. Here we not only learn with and from each other, but we hopefully take those teachings and apply them to our lives. We practice not just mitzvot of ritual that give us tribal identity, but especially those mitzvot of doing for and with each other.

Another Olympic story from the Seattle Special Olympics a few years ago encapsulates that for which we should strive. Nine contestants with physical or mental disabilities, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win. All, that is, except one little boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry and slowed and looked at him. Then they all turned around and went back – every one of them. One girl with Down's Syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better" Then all

nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line. May each of us remember this year that what matters in this life is more than winning for ourselves. What matters in this life is helping others win, even if it means slowing down and changing our course.

In our dream of creating a synagogue community of prayer, learning and compassion, may each of us be conscious of moving slower, changing our course and being there for another.