

October 15, 2020
Tishrei 27, 5781



Message from the President of the United Synagogue

Dear Honorary Officers, Rabbis and Rebbetzens,

What can I say to you? Not since the Second World War has there been such a challenging Yamim Noraim period for our communities. During the Blitz, many of our services were canceled or held at unusual times. How peculiar and how unfortunate that some 80 years later, we have had to think again in similar terms.

What you have done over the past few months is extraordinary. You have had to re-imagine shul again and again, and then following the latest government announcement, re-imagine it once more. You have built up confidence in your members to ensure they felt comfortable setting foot inside our buildings. You have addressed multiple queries on a daily basis when in 'normal' years your planning would be done and dusted by the summer.

Just days before Rosh Hashanah we were forced to rethink once more because of changing government guidelines. The level of responsibility on your shoulders has been immense. You have stood up to be counted and said as our forefather Avraham said to God when facing the challenge of the *Akeda*: 'Hineni', here I am, ready to serve.

There is a fascinating lesson about taking responsibility in this week's *sedra*. Brothers Cain and Abel both bring offerings to God. Cain has the idea first and brings vegetable produce since he farms the land. Abel, a shepherd, offers the firstborn of his flocks. God accepts Abel's offering but not Cain's. Angered, Cain goes on to kill Abel. When God asks Cain where Abel is, Cain utters the famous line: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

One reading of the rabbinic commentators is that this is murder, caused by jealousy. Another commentator, the Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush Wisser, Ukraine, 1809–1879), has a fascinating alternative explanation. He suggests that Cain believed humans were automatons, programmed to do God's bidding. We have no free will or say over how we act and as such, God, not Cain, was responsible for Abel's death. Read through this lens, "Am I my brother's keeper?" is Cain shrugging to God: "What's it got to do with me? You made me this way!" No, says God, you've got it wrong: you always have a choice. You need to take responsibility for your actions.

That is what you have all done these past difficult months. I remember when I was the Chair of one of our largest communities. I'll be honest – I thought I had it tough. The meetings, the countless hours, all the evenings that we dedicate to our communities: this can come at a cost, whether personal or professional. But what you have done is nothing short of superhuman, leading our communities through this crisis.

You have been creative, coming up with different ways to run services to ensure as many of your members could take part and hear a Shofar blowing. You have had to conduct pastoral care remotely rather than face-to-face. You have not wavered despite the challenging circumstances. I know that your whole shul team together with United Synagogue head office staff have all gone above and beyond to support our communities during the pandemic.

For this, and for so much more, I thank you all on behalf of the Trustees of the United Synagogue and our Chief Executive, Steven Wilson. As we begin the Torah again from the Book of Bereishit, may God bless us all with a year of good health and success.

Shabbat shalom,

Michael Goldstein
President, United Synagogue

Treasurer: Maxwell Nisner

Trustees: Andrew Eder, Claire Lemer, Fleurise Lewis, Nicola Rosenfelder, Barry Shaw, Saul Taylor, Jacqui Zinkin

Chief Executive: Steven Wilson

United Synagogue

305 Ballards Lane
London N12 8GB

T: 020 8343 8989

E: info@theus.org.uk

www.theus.org.uk

Registered Charity No. 242552



The US