

Shabbat Shalom

I'm delighted to welcome here all the friends and family of James. James, you read absolutely wonderfully in the service today and have made everyone very proud. Your mother's nerves have even begun to calm down a bit.

James, this time last year I said that Jacob's words were possibly the first proto-tweet in human history. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God and that is the gateway to heaven." Little did I know that one year later, I would talk with the bar mitzvah boy about mobile phones, social networking and being digital native at his rehearsal. On Monday afternoon last week, we discussed the prevalence of young people who communicate through their mobiles – I bet you haven't texted your mother from upstairs...yet. But then again, maybe that's the best way to communicate – Nicky and Finlay have you succumbed to telling James his dinner's ready via facebook? As a result, I decided to write my sermon in a series of facebook posts – so if you all log on now and have a look, I'm going to take a break, I'll be back in ten minutes when you've finished reading...Ha, as if James, you're not getting away that easily – and since I can't infiltrate your dreams to upload my thoughts, you'll just have to listen to me for a little while.

James, your davar torah touched on some really very important issues about dreams. I want you to imagine that you live in your home with your family, a kind and generous

brother, friends and relatives around you. But it's special, there's never a cross word between the brothers; parents don't have to nag you because you do your homework and your chores without arguing (do kids still have chores to do for pocket money). The parents don't have to worry about chauffeuring around here and there for you to rehearse in your band. All is peaceful and pleasant. Really it's an unrecognisable little piece of paradise, well for most of us it is anyway.

You see, it's unrealistic. Human beings do not live in such cosy idylls that look disturbingly like some kind of paradise developed by a sci-fi author. Even though, I do know that Raf is always kind and generous to you and that you never fight. It's nonsense of course to think that life can be governed by perfect, amicable and rational or always positively charged relationships. We could not have the love, companionship, righteousness and care that human beings are capable of expressing. Because an absence of strife, bickering, fallings out and reconciliations would not be human. We might as well be the rock on which Jacob places his head – inanimate, hard, stonefaced. The imagined perfect idyll is not human at all. The endowment of the capacity to care for another person is what makes us human, but that same human-ness is what makes brothers fight and deceive their parents. Jacob, Esau, Isaac and Rebekah – they are a thoroughly human family, characteristic of the bible, we get the warts and all.

It's to the great credit of the authors of the biblical text that they do not spare us the sordid details of families. There's no whitewashing of family arguments and sibling rivalries. Perhaps that's because there's an avoidance of deification, or at least, canonisation to sainthood. There can be only one source of perfection and everything else is plainly not that source. King David, Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – every single character is more real and full of colour than anything we could imagine and every family is the same. Truth is, I think most of us spend a lot of time trying to 'appear' as something that we all know is utterly unrealistic. The bible is not interested in that, at all.

Yet, at the same time, the biblical story contains this counter point, the expression of something different, a perfected or decimated world, a world envisioned as either monumentally worse or hopefully much better. That vision is granted to the prophets who wince at the pain of a single injustice for fear of the bigger harm it does to society and their articulation of peace, justice and righteousness; and that vision is at the heart of the motif of Jacob's dream. This is not a prediction. Jacob does not need to go to a therapist for dream interpretation, his dream is just like the dream you mention of the late Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. It is one that describes an alternative world, connected to something bigger, more profound and potentially more hopeful. Jacob wakes and makes a promise based on his dream – the dream itself is a reminder that his destiny is for important things, if he will only choose to follow a

path of becoming the patriarch. From the midst of the discord and threats against his life by his brother, under immense pressure and anxiety, he lies down and dreams that things will be alright. When he wakes, back with a bump of reality he strikes a deal – more circumspect than his dream state, he bargains with God, 'If you do this, then I'll do that'. But the vision, the dream, not literally of angels but of the importance of our task on this earth, is affirmed and cemented in the inanimate rock, anointed with oil, a marker stone hinting at something stable, permanent, enduring.

This week has been a hard week in which it has been difficult to permit myself to think that things will be alright. We don't have to divine the future, using charms, amulets and witchcraft. I'm not looking for my fortune to be told or my palm to be read. I'm looking for permission to think that it will be better, that one day, yes even in my lifetime, the shedding of blood on national, political and religious grounds will utterly and permanently cease.

On Wednesday I rushed to facebook to check in with friends in Tel Aviv after a bus was blown up in a terrorist attack, and as the simple status popped up on screen 'Ok' I wept. My friends, my left wing, liberal, peacenik friends, my dreamers, who live in a region of the world filled with fear, violence and aggression (from many quarters), were close. But none were injured. And yet, our dream was not sullied, the vision was sustained. Those same peaceniks have been through it before. They've had

friends killed in bombs, they've watched the right gain ground, seem unassailable in the elections. But they're still there, invoking dreams of a time without violence, of coexistence, of two states, of pluralism and tolerance.

Then I received a message from my colleague in Haifa. A close friend's son had been on the bus in Tel Aviv and was in hospital. It's hit my colleague's family, his daughter in particular, quite hard. We've been here before, the escalation of violence, the war, or mini-war as one described it. Yet, on facebook again there popped up messages of peace, of the possibility of reconciliation, plenty of criticism of the government of Israel and as much criticism, if not more, of Hamas.

Forgive me for a moment then if I request here in the UK that we act a little more humbly than voice our crass indignation or gross expectation (and self-centredness) that we might change governments' policies in the Middle East. It's not as if we're living there, enduring the atmosphere of violence and conflict that has embedded itself into the psyche of the peoples. Pardon me if I ask you not to conflate, simplify and explain away a highly complex situation with statements such as 'it's all because of....(the Occupation, the lack of partner for peace etc)' or 'INSERT BLANK HERE are the root of the problem' (Hamas, Lieberman, Obama) or even 'Israel just needs to win the hasbara, the public relations war'. Only a sledgehammer on the rock would reduce it to these sound bite issues, ignoring:

history, culture, sociology, global politics, local politics, media reporting and propaganda.

I have always regarded our duty in all of this is one that navigates a path in which we retain a sense of the humanist, universalist Judaism, the humane response, conscious, for example, of the unimaginable pain of a family who have lost a loved one in a terror attack or bombing sortie in Gaza. I do not have easy answers to the politics and I do not have, in all reality, in spite of my self-delusions, access to influence politicians' decisions. If solutions were that simple, then we wouldn't be in the mess, and if I was such a marvellous analyst of geopolitics then people I respect would not hold very different opinions to my centre-left stance.

Our role is to retain and affirm, and reaffirm, a belief in humankind; James, our dreams are what enable us to do that. Our dreams are full of hope, of the tiny ember that will set light to the kindling that will be fanned into the flames of peace, of harmony, of the ploughshare not the sword, pruning hook not spear.

James, your vision for yourself described in your Davar Torah, is probably not far off what your parents dream for you. That you will grow up, healthy, thoughtful, aware of your history, conscious of whom you are and what is important in life, caring and kind. We cannot ask for much more of our children, our dream, the ladder of our dreams, is invested with our earnest desire for everything, and I mean everything, good in the world

to be bestowed on our family. James, for you and your family, this Bar Mitzvah is a moment of fulfilment and of forward looking hopefulness. The timelessness of this moment in the sanctuary, secluded from the reality of the world is the dream, it is the counterpoint to strife and conflict.

Rabbi Michael Melchior, a former member of the Israeli Knesset and Orthodox Chief Rabbi of Norway, wrote recently in the Times of Israel:

“Leaders who believe in the necessity to respect the will of God in whose image we are all created and who understand that crushing His image by spilling the blood of the ‘other’ ultimately desecrates His Holy Name in the world.

“So for a moment, close your eyes and imagine how such a world could look. Now open them. The truth is that 80 percent of both Israelis and Palestinians support this kind of peace and long for it to happen. Both peoples lack the faith that the other side has the same dream. We need to foster this faith.”

James, life is full of the full blown spectrum of ups and downs, of emotions, behaviours and moral decisions for better or worse. That is life, complex, challenging and imperfect. Yet our dream, the dream you describe in your Davar Torah, is one like Jacob’s dream, like the dream of Rabbi Melchior. It is the dream that is the counter point to the reality that allows us to imagine the perfect, the parallel vision of hope that runs alongside the day-to-day. It is the anticipation of being part of something bigger, more important, fundamentally whole and

better. That is the dream of Liberal Judaism which we must internalise and about which we must speak. So James, my hope for you on this day is that you will always hold on to the values, the ideals and the longings of your youth. That your dreams may become more complex but never sullied by cynicism or loss of faith in humanity. That you will be able to make independent choices to fulfil your dreams and when those choices seem hard you will have your family and friends around you. And James, that you will always make your parents, your grandparents and friends, as proud of you as you have done today. May this be God's will, and let us say: Amen.