

Shabbat Shalom...That sounds rather hollow this morning, as I am sure it did last week too as the fighting continues in Gaza. I shall return to this later on in my sermon. For now though, I'm pleased to be back from honeymoon – well not that pleased, it had to come to an end but it's a shame it has. But enough of me, there's been plenty of time for that in the last few weeks.

So, our court Jew (Joseph) has made good. Rescued his brothers from famine, secured them land and even gained permission from the Pharaoh to leave in order to bury his father in the Cave of Machpelah. When the end comes, even the Egyptians mourn and he is almost given a State funeral. Joseph's story has come to an end and the long awaited turn, for the Pharaoh who knew not Joseph, is just around the corner. Who remembers the troubled beginning for this young lad, just 17, sold into servitude by his brothers? Who can recall the seductive wife of Potiphar who cries foul when her advances are rejected? Our hero now bears all the strength and wisdom of someone left to languish in a foreign jail, who gradually built success in the palace of the king. Joseph's life is a story waiting to be put on to the stage, perhaps with a little Lord Webber music to keep the story moving.

Joseph's ancestors have been in, and out, of the land of Canaan several times before. Relationships with the kings of the time is nothing new to Abraham or Isaac. But there is something different here. The young lad has made good, come through it and established an identity for himself – he is even given an Egyptian name and wife (though in an Apocryphal text she, of course, converts and is more pious perhaps even than Joseph). Zaphenath-Paneah, Joseph, the image of him riding around with the people shouting 'Abrek' before him has vague echoes, for us at least, of a less friendly leader of the court who commands subservience – the enemy of the Jews – Haman.

This is a tale that, in Genesis at least, concludes with a Son of Israel (there's no such thing yet as 'Jews') making good in a foreign land. Holding power and wielding it, eventually to save not only Egyptians but his family too. His power, his tribes' power, will eventually be too much and the collapse of the long established friendship will see this minority experience the darkest days of slavery.

One of the first books I bought about Judaism, written by an academic, before I went to the Leo Baeck College (about 10 years ago) was "Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History" by David Biale (who, at the time, was an associate professor of Jewish history). I'm not the world's greatest historian, so I was quite proud of myself that I managed to read the book cover to cover and articulate its main themes. This was some time ago by the way, so don't expect chapter and verse. I duly mentioned this to someone who has become a friend of mine – a historian and educator - who duly responded "Great, of course you know that it's just a polemic." In my naivety, or lack of own learning, I had read the book at face value.

I had not realised that the very essence of this book, "Power and Powerlessness" was an attempt to re-examine and redress the understanding of the Jews' power in diaspora life. Specifically Biale wanted to cast doubt on the Zionist construction of Jewish diaspora identity which owed much to the poetry of Bialik, describing the pious religious Jews as they stood by the slaughter of their family. Powerlessness equals diaspora. Power equals sovereignty. So the Zionist trope went anyway. Biale's book is flawed. Not because he doesn't know his history, but because the book is polemical. He wants to assert the power of the American Liberal democracy and the State of Israel in equal portions. If differently written the conclusion would be reasonable – Jews have had, even in a diaspora and even when an often-times oppressed minority, some degree of power. The power of the State of Israel is, though markedly different (involving as we know both political power and military power), is not as great or independent as the early constructors of Zionist identity might have imagined. So, as with many historical debates the truth is somewhere in between. I guess, if he'd been so inclined, he could have begun with the story of Joseph. Joseph is not totally powerless, though he does not wield absolute power either. He is a classic example of the potential for Jewish success in a diaspora, pseudo-meritocracy which allows any person to succeed if they can. Though turn the page and the other classic example of ancient Jewish Diaspora - Egyptian Slavery - is in evidence. Biale is aware, has to be aware, of the absolute impotence experienced at major junctures in history – most notably and obviously the Shoah, the Holocaust.

Power and powerlessness – the truth is somewhere in between. Now, even more than ever, nation states cannot exist totally independently of any other nation state or the global experience.

Talking of the Holocaust, it will soon be Holocaust Memorial Day – not Yom Hashoah – but the 27<sup>th</sup> January date set for the national observance of a day to remember the Holocaust and other genocides. 27<sup>th</sup> January because that is a day of liberation of Auschwitz, when the Jews in their powerlessness were freed by the world. Yom Hashoah on the 27<sup>th</sup> Nissan is a day set closely to the time of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, when in spite of powerlessness the Jewish community of Warsaw rose up to fight against their murderers. What a different way of viewing Jewish life. Probably a reflection of how the West views its role today anyway – as protector of the powerless and of those whose human rights are violated – the greatest example of which is the powerless Jew of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.

While away, something connected came to my attention. I bought several books for reading on the island of Mauritius. One by Michael Chabon and one by Gerald Seymour. The book by Michael Chabon, "Gentlemen of the Road" was to be named "Jews with swords". He writes in the afterword how he wanted to write a swashbuckling yarn about Jews. You never hear about Jews with swords (he argues), so that is what he writes – set during the time of the Jewish Khazar kingdom of the 8-10<sup>th</sup> Centuries. The book by Gerald Seymour "Time Bomb" is a classic Seymour novel. But the backdrop, and I'm not giving anything away, is

about Sobibor – the death camp – and the attempted escape from it, whilst the foreground is about a Jewish Russian multi-millionaire. Again, in an afterword, Seymour writes about the extent to which he was inspired by the escapees' story and felt the time dwelt on the impotent, powerless Jews who went on their way to their death, needed to be balanced by the story of heroism. Of course in 1982 a book was written about this, but perhaps not enough was made of it for Seymour. So that's two books, which I did not pick for their 'Jewish' content which somehow deal with the same theme – Jewish power and powerlessness.

As if that wasn't enough I discovered, reading in the paper on the plane home, that Daniel Craig has just made a film about the Jewish Partisans in Belarus. Again, in the writing about this there is a, by now, familiar line about the discovery of these stories of resistance, of throwing off (or attempting to throw off) the powerlessness of Jewish existence to, in some cases, violently and brutally defeat your oppressors.

Perhaps I'm reading too much into this, but I am curious why now, why has the 'Jew in need of liberation from Auschwitz' been replaced by 'Jew bearing sword and gun'?

We recently celebrated Chanukah. For years, the Zionist movement held on to these stories of Jewish triumph and rebellion. Whether the Macabees, Masada, Bar Kochba or Warsaw Ghetto, the early Zionist ideologues struggled to negotiate an identity which whilst supporting the idea that diaspora existence was weak and sovereignty was strong, could find examples of resistance under non-Jewish rule. They may not be swashbucklers but they have been around for quite some time as stories of Jews with swords.

I wonder, is the renewed interest in Jews with power and might in the diaspora a reclaiming of a hitherto negated part of identity or a more curious Western development in relation to the Jews?

I don't have an answer to this question and I would be interested to see if others have noticed a similar coincidence of themes in fiction in the last year. Nonetheless, what it makes absolutely clear to me is the difficulty that is felt when confronted with a contemporary Jew with sword that is not in the pages of best selling fiction or a box office success at the cinema. I am not sure that the world has quite come to terms with what it means for the State of Israel, a state for Jews, to be armed and prepared to use those arms. There has never been an equivalent to Christendom or Caliphate in Jewish terms (and there is absolutely no desire in history or in the present for Jewish empire either). But sovereign Jews with a military force is something that I think the world is still not comfortable with, especially now the analogies of David and Goliath don't work.

I should of course add that that does not mean I approve of all military action by Israel. I am distinctly uncomfortable with some actions taken by the Government and the IDF. Furthermore, I'm extremely torn in deciding how I should state my views about the current

conflict because I'm not sure how that fits with my role as Rabbi. The situation is becoming more complex as the days go on. Nonetheless, I would say this, choosing my words carefully: you cannot have a sovereign state and not allow it to protect itself from a perceived existential threat. By that I mean, sovereignty, the nation state, cannot be allowed and created and then somehow rendered powerless by forbidding the use of the armed forces. Israelis do not want to be commemorating the day on which Jews were liberated from Auschwitz by the ever-so-generous allies. Israelis commemorate the day on which the Warsaw ghetto uprising took place, when in spite of the allies' failure to protect them they rose up from powerlessness and attempted to determine their own fate.

Jewish history, identity and politics are complex. The hero of our story this morning, Joseph, shows just that. From hated brother to powerless prisoner. From dream diviner to powerful 'Prime minister'. From saviour to threat. The Joseph story contains it all. We would do well to think about that.

So, I wish you a Shabbat Shalom. We pray, with a sincerity and with hope, that we shall see in our lives a time when nation shall not lift up sword against nation. We conclude every service, every Tefillah, every Kaddish, with words of peace. We pray that the peace of our prayers is realised and becomes the peace of our world. May the blood of life cease to be shed and may every person sit under their vine and their fig, with none to make them afraid. May this be God's will and may we be worthy of it in our lifetime. Amen.