



## SERMON EREV ROSH HASHANAH: MEMORY AND HOPE

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Wednesday 2 October 2024  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

Rebel, o Jews!  
The Shofar summons not God  
But humans to march.  
The voice of Isaiah  
Was not intended to reach  
Only the rim of our outer ears.  
The priest's pulsing rage against sin  
Can be transmuted  
Into anguished anger against iniquity.  
This Judaism, this curious civilisation,  
This happy union of memory and hope,  
This rapture of continuous creation,  
This joyous mixture of faith and folk,  
This amalgam of history and conscience,  
This beloved culture of a people  
Has the potential of priest, psalmist and prophet.  
Rebel, o Jews,  
Rebel!

**[1]** Those words were written by Rabbi Mitchell Salem Fisher.<sup>i</sup> That idea of our being held together by “*memory and hope*” is particularly powerful: we don’t, or needn’t, share DNA; we don’t, or needn’t, share religious beliefs; we don’t, or needn’t, share a love of klezmer music on the one hand or chaminados eggs on the other. And although the metaphor of all being one big family is an attractive one, it’s just that – a metaphor.

**[2]** What ties the Jewish people together is collective memory, collective hope, and, floating somewhere in between those two, care for one another wherever we may be or live.

<sup>i</sup> Mitchell Salem Fisher, *Rebel, O Jews! and other prayers* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1973): 4–5. Edited for gender-neutrality.

**[3]** In 1983, the English courts struggled to define an “*ethnic group*” for the purposes of anti-discrimination law. In their musings, they noted<sup>ii</sup> that one marker of an ethnic group is “*being a minority or being ... a dominant group within a larger community*”.

**[4]** I’d question the use of the word ‘or’. An ethnic group can be a minority and a dominant group. That dichotomy is certainly something that the Jewish people has experienced over the last year. Jews have been subjected to the powerlessness of the oppressed – terrorist attacks, antisemitism, isolation – but Jews have also enjoyed the privileges of the powerful: weapons, bombs, bomb shelters. Nachum Goldmann, founder of the World Jewish Congress, described the paradox well:<sup>iii</sup>

For two thousand years we were powerless as a people, and without power we learned how to be the best visionaries, the best dreamers, the best idealists. Now the powerless have become powerful. We have an army and flags and a state and victories. And in America, Jews are well-organised and wealthy and highly placed in all of the realms of political, cultural and economic life. But we have not yet learned how to use our power in the service of our visions. To place our reliance on power is our greatest weakness. The survival of the Jewish people is more in danger today than ever before.

**[5]** Whether we’re powerless or powerful, the narrative relies on the notion of peoplehood. We’re tied together, with memory and hope.

**[6]** And, this year, the ‘hope’ side of the equation shrank a little, and our memories became more burdensome. The Jewish people has suffered a trauma. The immediate victims of that trauma may have been total strangers on the other side of the world, but we all felt it.

**[7]** Moreover, it is not only acceptable, it is normal, it is right, for us to have felt it. To have cared. To have shuddered when we heard the news. Those being murdered, kidnapped, raped, assaulted, may have been complete strangers, but they could have been us. If our common ancestors had made different geographical decisions – taken this boat rather than that, married someone travelling east rather than west – we could quite easily have been at the Supernova music festival the day

<sup>ii</sup> *Mandla v Dowell Lee* [1983] 2 AC 548 at p 562

<sup>iii</sup> Quoted in David N Myers (ed), *The Eternal Dissident: Rabbi Leonard I Beerman and the radical imperative to think and act* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018): 231.



that Hamas attacked. Rabbi Fisher spoke of Jews as an “*amalgam of history and conscience*”: there’s the history, right there. The historical quirks that bind us together.

**[8]** Conscience binds us together as well. We don’t care only for Israelis whose lives have been cruelly taken; we care, too, for Palestinians whose lives have been cruelly taken. Seeing ourselves in other Jews’ shoes is a hallmark of being part of the Jewish people. Shedding a tear, literal or figurative, for every innocent human life lost, is also a hallmark of being part of the Jewish people.

**[9]** In the 1st-century words of Rabbi Hillel: “*If I not for myself, who will be for me – and if I am only for myself, what am I?*”<sup>iv</sup> In the 19th-century words of Rabbi Simchah Bunim of Peshischa: “*Everyone must have two pockets ... In [one’s] right pocket are to be the words, ‘For my sake the world was created,’ and in [the] left, ‘I am [dust] and ashes.’*”<sup>v</sup> In the 21st-century words of Professor Shulamit Reinhartz: “*[B]eing a member of the Jewish people ... mean[s...] pride (or shame) in the accomplishments (or crimes) of other Jewish people.*”<sup>vi</sup> It’s the same tension, echoing throughout our history: us and others, particularism and universalism, oppressed and dominant, right and wrong, history and conscience, memory and hope.

**[10]** Tension is a hallmark of being part of the Jewish people. Tonight, at the threshold of the year 5785, the tensions of our Jewishness come to a crescendo. We look back over the last year of Jewish peoplehood with a combination of sorrow and shame (the precise ratio will vary from person to person). We look forward to the next year with an anxious yearning for something better, a year in which we, individually and collectively, truly grow into our potential to be like the priests, psalmists and prophets of old. חדש עלינו שנה טובה, may the new year be for us a good year. בן יהי רצון, may this be God’s will.

<sup>iv</sup> m.Avot 1:14

<sup>v</sup> Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: the later masters*, trans Olga Marks (New York: Schocken Books, 1948; 1961 ed): 249–250.

<sup>vi</sup> Shulamit Reinhartz, “The ‘Jewish Peoplehood’ concept: complications and suggestions” in Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Judit Bokser Liwerant and Yosef Gorny (eds), *Reconsidering Israel-Diaspora Relations* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 66–85: 67.

