



## ADDRESS TO AJEX REMEMBRANCE SERVICE

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Sunday 10 November 2024  
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

**[1]** In 1926, a rabbi in Liverpool, Dr Izak Goller, wrote a poem entitled *And So They Died*.\*

And so they died!  
Men, both young and middle-aged,  
With the surge and the frolic of the red blood through  
    their bodies,  
With a monotone of 'wife' and 'parent' and 'child'  
    beating a devil's tattoo on the tight-stretched  
    drums of their brains;  
Puzzled;  
Puzzled and resigned to the Thing whose gore-  
    splutt'ring maw had become their world, their  
    atmosphere,  
Omnipresent, unheeded!...  
Swearing,  
Jesting,  
Uneasily spurred to heroism by the prick of pagan  
    patriotisms  
And rum:  
Maddened by the sight of a dirty mess suddenly  
    evolved from a comrade of the Hell-hour;  
Moaning furtively remembered scraps of latent  
    prayer;  
And so –  
And so they died!  
One pigmy said Yea,  
And another said Nay,  
And newspapers lied,  
And so –  
And so they died!  
Englishman and Frenchman, and Austrian and  
    German, and Russian and Belgian and Turk,

\* Izak Goller, *A Jew Speaks!: a new book of verse and prose* (Liverpool: T Lyon and Co, 1926): 40–41. Slightly abridged. I have chosen to maintain the poet's gendered God-language as it is easily arguable that the 'Lord' being prayed to by warmongers is indeed a masculine god.

And men from far-off lands across the sea,  
White and Black,  
Gentile and Jew  
And so –  
And so they died!  
And Prussian killed Russian,  
And Briton killed Turk,  
And Jew killed Jew  
And so they died!  
On either side of those trenches armies knelt,  
And priests prayed humbly to their Prince of Peace:  
Lord! We are Thy favourites – they are Thy foes. Kill  
them! Kill them! KILL THEM!  
Rabbis, too, in every land  
Prayed to Isaiah's God:  
Lord, may all the king's enemies fall before him!  
And so –  
And so –  
And so they died!  
And Prussian killed Russian,  
And Briton killed Turk,  
And Jew killed Jew –  
And so they died!  
Lord, Lord, what fools Thy humans are!

**[2]** Dr Goller's helplessness and bafflement leap off the page as he tries to encapsulate the utter idiocy of war as a method of settling human conflict.

**[3]** Not only is there no guarantee that whoever wins a war – not that anybody can truly 'win' such a destructive phenomenon in which there are only losers – not only is there no guarantee that whoever wins a war in any sense has right or justice on their side. Not only that, but war leads to the most tragic and absurd consequences.

**[4]** Clergy on one side of the border praying for victory for their nation while clergy on the other side beseech the same God for the opposite.

**[5]** Jew killing Jew. Human killing human. Always the most vulnerable and least privileged who suffer: women, children, soldiers from the working classes, young men whose lives are wrenched off-track. While God sits, looks on and weeps – in helplessness and bafflement.

**[6]** Every day, we wake up to news footage of armed conflict, in every part of the world, more distressing than that which was broadcast the day before. However we label the geopolitics behind it – just war, proportionate – the reality for human beings is unchangeably awful. Pagan patriotisms and rum must not blind us to this.



**[7]** This Remembrance Sunday offers us an opportunity to appreciate some of our greatest assets. Firstly, our lives: we have what countless soldiers lost, the ability to live, to experience, to feel, to love, to choose.

**[8]** Secondly, our safety: we are not confined to trenches, nor do we tremble in air raid shelters; we do not fear the arrival of a leaflet telling us we have hours to leave our home, nor have we been ripped from our families and held against our will in a strange land.

**[9]** Thirdly, the stuff of remembrance itself, the legacy we have inherited of richly compelling stories illustrating the horror and malignity of war. Our ex-servicepeople have extraordinary tales to tell, whether in person or in recorded words to which we are privileged to have access from beyond the grave, tales that tell the senselessness of war more powerfully than any sermon or any poem.

**[10]** Therefore, as, in a few moments' time, we open the ark to recite our memorial prayers, I invite you to reflect and contemplate on the futility of armed conflict, on the irrational and vainglorious wickedness of war, on the countless lives decimated by this great evil, and the duty incumbent on each and every one of us to remember and to share these messages. בן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

