

LET THE SEA THUNDER

SERMON TO BRIGHTON AND HOVE LIBERAL JEWISH
SYNAGOGUE: 17th MAY 1935 (2025)

An interesting article appeared in the Manchester Guardian yesterday - that is, May the 16th 1935, as you all know perfectly well. It was about the reaction of the League of Nations to the phenomenon of oil pollution of the seas.

Great Britain was the country which first suggested that such pollution was a worthy subject for consideration by the League of Nations, and in Parliament earlier this week, various Members pushed the Foreign Secretary to make a greater commitment to take the lead on tackling this global evil.

One of those members, Sir Herbert Samuel - the cousin of our own movement's founder Lily Montagu - asked a pertinacious question: "Will not the Government itself form a scheme [for reducing oil pollution] for the acceptance of other countries?"

Sir Herbert, as we would perhaps expect of a man brought up in the Jewish tradition, is not prepared

to sit and wait for other actors to come up with a solution (or, more likely, for the remote possibility of other actors coming up with a solution). Rather, he holds by the same principle as the sage Hillel: "Im lo achshav, eimatai?" - if not now, when? Or, as we might rightly add, if not us, who?

As a seaside congregation, we are all conscious of the ills of oil pollution. It is a good few years since we feared enemy soldiers landing on our beaches, but in recent times we have seen a different pest arriving on our shores, a slimy and viscous pest that disables birds, repels tourists and, my good wife tells me, defies stain-remover.

This should concern not just those who own businesses adjacent to the beach, nor just those who, like us, live in seaside cities and towns. Our scientists have not yet established the full import of these unwelcome deposits, but we can be confident

that anything which causes the mass death of seabirds is powerful and alarming.

Religion is here to react to the spiritual and emotional impacts of things which are powerful and alarming, but we do not pretend - have never pretended - that we can resolve the physical impacts.

This congregation may not have been here during the Great War, but I am sure we all had our moments of prayer and supplication during those dark years, without for a moment expecting that our prayers would directly bring about victory for His Majesty's Forces. The most we could hope for would be comfort and succour. If we wanted to serve the national struggle in a more efficacious manner, we had to volunteer our time or money directly.

So too when it comes to the menace of oil pollution: we can pray that our children will no longer be distressed by finding the blackened carcasses of seabirds on our shores, and by doing so

we may empower and enable ourselves to comfort them, but we cannot expect the oil to return to its tanks by the power of prayer alone.

That is one lesson we learned from our experience of war. The other lesson we learned is the extraordinary success that can be achieved when nations work together rather than against each other. The verse from the prophet Isaiah telling of a time when “nation shall not lift up sword against nation” is well-known to the point of being trite, but only a few know its first half: “And He shall decide for many peoples.”

In an era of redemption, all the different peoples’ and nations’ decisions will be, if not centralised, at least coherent and coöperative. As Jews this idea should not disconcert us at all. The Jewish people has long been dispersed. Who among us does not have close family living abroad? There may be oceans between us but we know that we are one, we know how ludicrous it is to treat our various scions

as different merely because of the differing parts of the globe in which we dwell.

When nations insist on their unique distinctiveness, we have vainglory, enmity and war. When nations embrace the togetherness of mankind, they can further the work of redemption. Our planet itself certainly does not see itself as divided and partitioned. Seagulls in Brighton are no more or less safe than Seagulls in Bangkok or Bogotá. The Psalmist adjured: "Let the ocean and all within it thunder," almost as if the ocean is an entity of its own.

And if it is an entity of its own, then, despite what it is currently doing to our beaches - blackening them, soiling them with noxious fluids - the solution, again, is not war but coöperation. Mankind does not stand a the enemy of the sea; we stand as a potential partner. The sea nurtures us, facilitates our trade, brings us bananas; in turn,

we must protect and defend the sea from the worst ravages of our overuse of nature's resources.

We pray that the destruction of the natural world will come to a speedy end. But to make that happen, we must support the League of Nations in its efforts to bring nations together to prevent such damage from taking place. Moreover, we should, like Hillel the Elder, demand of our political leaders that Great Britain takes the first step. How much of a joy would it be for a rabbi of this congregation to stand here in, say, 90 years, and declare proudly that the Jewish community has been on the right side of history when it comes to the protection of the environment!

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