



**SERMON YOM KIPPUR:
MOSES OVER OUR SHOULDER**

Gabriel Webber, Wednesday 12 October 2016
Eastbourne Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 Timothy Evans was an illiterate Welsh van driver. In 1948, he and his new wife Beryl moved into the top floor flat at 10 Rillington Place, Notting Hill, London. In 1949, Beryl and their baby daughter Geraldine were found dead in the back yard of the house. A distraught Timothy blamed the man who lived in the ground floor flat, John Christie. But he was not believed, and despite some large gaps in the case for the prosecution, in 1950 Evans was hanged.

- 2 Three years later, a new lodger moved into what had been the Evanses' flat. In the shared kitchen downstairs, he started putting up shelves. But one of the walls he drilled through was hollow. Looking through the hole, he saw, to his horror, three dead bodies. When the police arrived, they found two more buried in the garden and one under the floorboards. All were women who had been murdered in exactly the same way as had Beryl and Geraldine Evans. Some had been hidden for more than a decade, since long before the Evans family arrived on the scene. The culprit was... John Christie, from the ground floor flat.

- 3 So Timothy Evans was an innocent man. The law had hanged an innocent man. The whole episode is regarded as one of the most dreadful miscarriages of justice in British history.¹ When Parliament abolished capital punishment in 1965, Timothy Evans must have been on its mind.
- 4 Timothy Evans has been on my mind too, recently, because a few weeks ago I read Sir Ludovic Kennedy' book² which finally exposed the truth to the British public. He powerfully narrated the course of events which led to Evans being executed. That was the first half of the book.
- 5 At that halfway point, when poor innocent Timothy Evans was hanged, I felt... horrified? Bereft? I don't know quite the word for it, but it truly upset me, very greatly, and on a very personal level. The way the book's potent words described how Evans had had everything he ever loved stolen away from him made me feel as if I'd been there, with him, throughout his ordeal. I felt that I was the only person in the world at that moment who cared about what had happened, who spared a thought for him, who remembered Timothy. I actually had to open a siddur and say kaddish to give myself some headspace. I don't remember ever having been affected quite like that by a work of history before.

6 But while the tragedy at Rillington Place hit me hard, the knowledge that humans have the ability to feel cross-generational empathy is hardly new. This morning we read of how the covenant at Sinai was made not just with the generation of Israelites who happened to be alive at the time, but also “with those who are not here with us this day”. We were all there. It’s not just that we should regard ourselves as if we were there: we were actually present. Us. “The coming generations; the converts who were yet to be converted.”³

7 The Israeli historian Ze’ev Magen⁴ has called this “a function of belonging”. “If you reach out,” he said, “and grasp your people’s hands, you were there. You participated in what they did in all places and at all times, you fought their battles, felt their feelings and learnt their lessons. You tended flocks with Rachel and slaved in Potiphar’s house with Joseph” – and, skipping through the generations of history – “you fled the Black Hundreds across Russia’s plains, and were welcomed by the Statue of Liberty at Ellis Island.” And so on.

8 The poet Jacob Glatstein⁵ turned this upside down: not only, he said, were future generations of Jews really there in spirit at Sinai, but past generations of Jews were really there in spirit during the Holocaust: “Even Moses, who so much didn’t want to die when his time came now died again. And his brother Aaron, and King David

[...] And with every holy soul that perished in torture, hundreds of souls of Jews long dead died with them...”

- 9 So why read this parasha, this tale of how we were all there at the making of the covenant, each Yom Kippur? One obvious answer is as a reminder of the rules to which we've agreed. Just as I might remind Vodafone what it says in my mobile 'phone contract when they try to overcharge me, so does God remind us that we agreed to the commandments and must keep up our end of the bargain.
- 10 But I think there's something else going on as well. Parashat Nitzavim reveals that the Israelites at Sinai were not alone: that Jews are never alone, and always accompanied not only by God but by the strength of our ancestors and the strength of our descendants. The Yom Kippur message we get from our Torah reading is that our generation is on show to every other generation of Jews, past and future. We have to act as a *dugma*, an example. While we are the incumbent Jewish people, we have custody of the laws and custody of the values. If we don't live them out, subsequent generations won't have their benefit. And we have, in our mind's eye, Moses and Aaron and King David over our shoulder as we enact our heritage, just as I now have Timothy Evans over my shoulder as I contemplate justice and injustice in my world.

- 11 The other message this parasha gives us is about the nature of experience. Just as the rabbis tell us that we tended sheep with Rachel even though we may not feel that we did, and just as I can read about the trial of Timothy Evans and feel some of its emotional intensity even though I know I wasn't there, our own experiences of our own selves are also subjective.
- 12 Yom Kippur is a chance for us to feel something like an out-of-body experience: to step away from what we know of ourselves and consider our behaviour at distance. This is why we atone "for the sin we have committed [...] consciously or unconsciously".⁶ This is the level of engagement with the process of repentance to which we can aspire. Kein y'hi ratzon: may that be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GW 12.10.16

¹ See eg. Stanley Burnton J in *Westlake v Criminal Cases Review Commission* [2004] EWHC 2279 (Admin) at [4]: <<http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2004/2779.html>>

² Ludovic Kennedy, *10 Rillington Place*, Gollancz, 1961

³ Shavuot 39a

⁴ Ze'ev Magen, *John Lennon and the Jews*, Createspace, 2010: p 68

⁵ Jacob Glatstein, 'The Dead Don't Praise God' in *I Keep Recalling: the Holocaust Poems of Jacob Glatstein*, Ktav, 1993: p 92

⁶ *Machzor Ruach Chadashah*: p 259