



IMAGINING THE EVENTS OF 1190

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Thursday 15 March 2018
City of York: Clifford's Tower memorial ceremony

The plaque at the base of Clifford's tower quotes Isaiah 42:12: **יְשִׁימוּ לַיהוָה, כְּבוֹד**

וְתִהְיֶינָהּ, בְּאֵימֵם יִגְיְדוּ – ***“Let them give honour to the Eternal One, and declare God's praise in the islands.”***

- 1 “See, each Jew, individually, was born quite recently. They haven't existed, built, climbed, fallen, lost, won, wept, rejoiced, created, learned, argued, loved and struggled for thousands of years. Nevertheless, each Jew has special eyes, eyes that can see for miles and miles. If they only will it, they can extend their arms and touch the eons and millennia. They can suck up the insights and bask in the glory and writhe in the pain and draw on the power emanating from every experience of the indomitable, indestructible, obstinately everlasting Jewish people.
- 2 “I say to each Jew: you tended flocks with Rachel and slaved in Potiphar's house with Joseph; you sang in the wilderness with Miriam and toppled the walls of Jericho with Joshua; you carried first fruits to the Temple Mount; and were mesmerised by Elijah on the slopes of Carmel; you brought the house down on the Philistines with Samson; you went into Exile with the prophet Jeremiah and hung your harp and wept by the rivers of Babylon; you were with the Zealots at Masada; you were crucified for refusing the cross in the Crusades, and were turned into ashes for stubbornness in the fires of the Inquisition; you were exiled from the shores of Spain by Isabella, and chased down in the pogroms of the Ukraine; you fled the Black Hundreds across



Russia's plains, and were welcomed by the Statue of Liberty at the gates of Ellis Island; you filed into the gas chambers of Bergen Belsen, and were hurled into the flames at Mathausen and Sobibor; you parachuted into Hungary with Hannah Senesh, and fought back in Warsaw with Mordechai Anilweicz; you were shot with your family in the forests of Poland and dug a mass grave and perished there at Babi Yar; you revived your dead language, you resurrected your sapped strength, you returned to yourself and renewed the lapsed covenant, you arose like a lion and hewed out your freedom on the plains and the mountains of your old-new land. Throughout all of this and so much more you were there with them – and they are here with you.”¹

- 3 So says the historian Ze'ev Magen. And somewhere, inside that timeline spanning from prehistory to the present day, is 1190. It seems a long way away; and so it is. Surrounding the site of Clifford's Tower now is a museum, a Travelodge, a shopping centre and, most unthinkably for those left in the aftermath of the massacre, a building where Jews come to worship.
- 4 1190 also seems very recent; and so it is. In March 1190, as in March 2018, the Jews of York were beginning to prepare for the festival of Passover. Cleaning their houses, arranging a Passover seder, just getting on with their normal daily existence. In March 1190, as in March 2018, they did not even consider the possibility that their lives, and their whole world, were on the verge of destruction.
- 5 And then, on 16 March 1190, everything changed. The community woke up, not necessarily considering itself a community. They were just people living in York who happened to be Jewish, but on a weekday morning, Aaron would be busying himself with his job in finance. Isaac would be opening up his fabric warehouse. Joshua would be visiting a client who wanted to buy



some precious metals. (And, in those days, Sarah, Rebecca and Hannah would no doubt have been heading to the market to buy food for the evening meal.) The Jews of York knew they were Jews, but they would not have woken up as a community. Just like Jews today, they had ‘civilian’ lives as well, often as their main existence.

- 6 But by that evening, they were a community. They were huddled together in the castle, paralysed by fear. The children had no idea what was going on; the adults not much more. Everything changed that day.
- 7 It’s always a mistake to study the history of famous men and believe that one is studying history in general. The real story of World War One is not the diplomats and the generals, but the fates of the individual soldiers who died in the trenches. I know that.
- 8 And yet, there is one famous man who met his death at Clifford’s Tower who brings me so much closer to the story. Rabbi Yom-Tov of York – ‘Yom-Tov’ literally meaning ‘good day’ – was one of the greatest Jewish scholars of his generation, and we still read his writings and commentaries to this day.
- 9 And his involvement, for me, is the most powerful and poignant reminder of the events of 1190. Because I am the third rabbi of York since Yom-Tov. My colleagues Daniel Lichman and Deborah Blausten preceded me in the last couple of years, then here I am.
- 10 As a student rabbi, I read a lot of ancient texts by great names who feel so, so remote. Rashi died in France in 1105. Joseph Caro died in Syria in 1575. I can read their words but not be able to dredge up much of a connection to them in their time. But the events in York in 1190 caused such a startling misalignment of the course of Anglo-Jewish history that, suddenly, I am three rabbinic generations away from one of my great medieval forbears.



11 The Jewish equivalent of 'RIP', after referring to someone who is no longer with us, is 'ZL': 'zichronam livracha', may their memory be for a blessing. Here, and now, we can say that with absolute and literal sincerity. Those who lost their lives in the castle, 828 years ago, are two or three generations of York Jews away from where we are now. We are carving out similar paths with our lives, reviving the world they thought permanently ended. That is our blessing, and may their names be it.

12 Zichronam livracha.

Check against delivery.

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¹ Ze'ev Magen. *John Lennon and the Jews* (Createspace, 2010): 67-68.