



**SERMON LECH L'CHA:¹
TZOM RABIN**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 20 October 2018
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 As many of you know, I spent Rosh Hashanah on the Isle of Wight. One of the people I met told me that they were a former chair of the community. “Now when exactly was it...?” they tried to remember. “I was definitely chair when Yitzchak Rabin was assassinated.” I’m not sure whether the Rabin assassination was of particular importance to the Jews of the Isle of Wight, or whether the congregant was trying to establish an alibi. But even for those like me who are just about too young to remember the event itself, the tragic murder of Israel’s fifth Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin, by a far-right Jewish extremist who opposed the Oslo peace process, is something that sticks in the mind.
- 2 Tomorrow in the Hebrew calendar is an unusual day, because it’s a day when Progressive Jews are stricter than Orthodox Jews. The Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism, our sister organisation in Israel, has determined that the Twelfth of Cheshvan, the anniversary of Rabin’s assassination, should be a fast day.²
- 3 There have been many terribly sad moments in Israeli history, and in Jewish history, so what exactly was it about the death of Yitzchak Rabin that led the IMPJ to single it out as an occasion for fasting?
- 4 Tomorrow aside, there are six days in the Jewish calendar on which, traditionally, everybody is supposed to fast. Yom Kippur is obviously the most famous, but even though it only comes ten days into the new year, it



isn't the first fast in the calendar. That honour goes to Tzom Gedaliah, the fast of Gedaliah – Gedaliah, about whom we read in today's haftarah.³

- 5 His story is a saddening and sickening one. Some time after the Babylonians conquered ancient Jerusalem, King Nebuchadnezzar appointed the Israelite Gedaliah as governor in charge of Judea. Gedaliah quickly proved himself a responsible and just leader: under his rule, Israelites who had fled the Babylonians began moving back to their land; agriculture began once again; life started returning to normal; and everyone prospered. And what happened? Ishmael ben Netanya got a bunch of his mates together and slaughtered Gedaliah and his officers.
- 6 It's never really explained in the Biblical text why Ishmael does this. But we can readily imagine what he said to his followers to whip them up into a murderous rage: "This Israelite Gedaliah is a traitor!" he'd say. "A turncoat. He's working with the Babylonians! He's a Nazi collaborator." OK, maybe he didn't literally say that – but it's that mindset. Never mind that Gedaliah's rule was fair. Never mind that the previously-scattered Israelites were regrouping and flourishing. "Apart from safety, security, housing, food, agriculture, irrigation," Ishmael ben Netanya said to his followers, "what has Gedaliah ever done for us?" The prospect of a happier, safer society was intolerable to Ishmael. So he slew Gedaliah. The first uplifting moment for the people of Judea for years, and baseless internal hatred and violence destroyed it.
- 7 Now, what was I saying about Yitzchak Rabin? Ah, yes: the first uplifting moment for the people of Israel for years, and baseless internal hatred and violence destroyed it. "This Jew Rabin is a traitor!" the assassin told himself. "A turncoat. He's working with the Arabs! He's a Nazi collaborator." The



assassin heard Yitzchak Rabin's speech to the Knesset⁴ in which Rabin said, "We have no desire for revenge. We harbour no enmity towards you. We, like you, are people who want to build a home, to plant a tree, to love, live side by side with you in dignity, in empathy, as human beings. We are today giving peace a chance." And that vision of a happier, safer society was intolerable to the assassin. So he slew Rabin.

- 8 The death of Gedaliah and the death of Rabin are terrifyingly similar. Two thousand years, two thousand Fasts of Gedaliah, and at least one Jew still hadn't learned the lesson, "Don't kill peace-loving leaders just because you don't believe in what they're doing."
- 9 But how different is the message of today's Torah reading. Yes, there's a battle. Hundreds of soldiers. Killing, no doubt, although it's not explicitly mentioned. But Abraham sets an early example of military ethics: he only enters the war for humanitarian purposes – to rescue his cousin, Lot, the innocent captive – and he refuses to accept any economic, political or financial benefit from his success. The King of Sodom urges him to keep the spoils of war: but no. He doesn't want any spoils, and he doesn't want to be in an alliance with the King of Sodom if that alliance is to be borne out of bloodshed.
- 10 Abraham understood that total pacifism is not an option. Occasions arise, sadly but inevitably, where violence, and the use of lethal force, are necessary. But he was equally, and equally rightly, convinced that these occasions should be minimised, and never used for ulterior motives or gain.
- 11 At the end of the War of the Four Kings Against the Five Kings, once Abraham had entered at the last minute and won the day, the mysterious King Melchizedek appears on the battlefield offering bread and wine. He



doesn't appear elsewhere in the Torah. He's only mentioned again once, and that doesn't help illumine us as to who he is. But his name... מלכי־צדק means 'King Righteousness'. And his kingdom, Shalem: שלם comes from the same root as שלום, the greeting of peace that we all know.

- 12 Abraham went into battle with the best of motives, and at the end, he was rewarded with a visit, and a meal, from King Righteousness, King of Peace. I don't think we can view that as anything but symbolic.
- 13 Yitzchak Rabin was, like Abraham, determined to minimise the necessity for violence. He had no interest in profiting from his military, but was instead ruthlessly focussed on bringing about a just and lasting peace such as to make the Israeli Defence Forces as close to redundant as possible. His story was tragically cut short, and did not end as happily as Abraham's – but nevertheless, I like to believe that, as he lay, after being shot, on the paving stones of Kikar Malchei Yisrael, 'Kings of Israel Square', he too was visited by Melchizedek, fed bread and wine, and felt acknowledged for what he had struggled to achieve.
- 14 And let us say, amen.

Check against delivery.

GW 20.10.18

¹ Genesis 14:8-24

² Haim Levinson. 'Reforms present: Fast of Rabin', YNet News, 11 February 2006: <<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3322784,00.html>>

³ From Jeremiah 40-41, specially chosen for the occasion

⁴ 21 September 1993