

D'var Torah for Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue 7th November 2015

Modern Day Abrahams

This week's Torah portion 'Chaye Sarah' deals, in detail, with seemingly mundane family affairs: the death and burial of Sarah, Abraham arranging a shiduch (match) for Isaac, his own marriage as an old man to Keturah and then his death and burial. This portion provides us with a well-deserved breather after the alarming events of parshat Vayera - the expulsion and near-death of Ishmael and the binding and near-death of Isaac.

Now I hope the numerous Rabbis in the room will forgive me for saying that as a youngster, the sermon represented an opportunity to have a bit of a breather from the service, or at least an opportunity to have a sit down.

I'd like to say thank you to Rabbi Aaron and to NPLS for giving me this opportunity to give a brief d'var torah to the community, and I hope whilst it does give everybody the opportunity to sit, it will also provoke questions and whet your appetite for an upcoming event at NPLS.

I've had a great morning with your amazing young people; we've been talking about the issue of immigration detention. I'll turn to this shortly – but first I want to introduce myself and the organisation that I am here to represent this morning...

My name is Sam Grant, and I am the campaigns manager for René Cassin. If I look vaguely familiar it is because I spent three years working at Liberal Judaism, and spent some of that time running the NPLS youth club.

It is great to be back to talk to you today about René Cassin.

René Cassin is the Jewish voice for human rights

We work to engage and mobilise the UK Jewish community on a range of human rights issues.

We are named in honour of Monsieur René Cassin – a French Jewish lawyer who along with Eleanor Roosevelt was one of the co-authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and winner of the Nobel Peace prize in 1968.

We are named in his honour, and work to promote and protect the rights of all people, drawing on Jewish experience and values –There is an intimate connection between human rights and the Jewish faith. In the words of Monsieur René Cassin himself:

'Human rights are an integral part of the faith and tradition of Judaism. The beliefs that people were created in the divine image, that the human family is one, and that every person is obliged to deal justly with every other person are basic sources of the Jewish commitment to human rights.'

But I do not need to spend my time today convincing you of this connection, it is evident that Liberal Judaism and NPLS in particular, embody and rightly take the commandment to 'pursue justice' to heart and see it as an essential element of what it means to be a Jew.

Today I want to talk in more detail about one of our campaigns

Indefinite immigration detention

This year has seen the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War.

The Jewish community's response to aspects of this crisis has been commendable— as a community we are rightly moved by our own history to help those seeking safety today.

The phrase 'refugees welcome' has become popular across Europe, indeed it was displayed in this very community. Yet the more I learn about the fate of those asylum seekers who end up in the detention centres the more I question whether this phrase rings true.

The shameful truth is that Britain is the only country in Europe where asylum-seekers are locked up indefinitely. The UK locks up over 30,000 people a year without a trial and without a time limit.

The UK wastes around 76 million pounds a year in doing so

On a detention system that, in the words of Conservative, Labour & Lib Dem MPs, is expensive, inefficient and unjust...

These detention centres, the majority of which are now run by private security companies are a stain on our country.

Earlier this year, Rabbi Lea came with me to visit Harmondsworth detention centre, near Heathrow, not too far from here.

This is the very same place where those held are now on hunger strike. People only go on hunger strike as a last resort – it is an act of protest by the voiceless and the powerless.

These centres hold some of the most vulnerable people in a society – torture survivors and pregnant women – yet there are regular reports of inadequate legal support, deficient physical and mental health support.

The fact that vulnerable people are locked up in these places without proper support and without any knowledge of when they might be released or deported leads to mental deterioration, which leads to suicide attempts and the deaths of nearly 30 people over the last 20 years.

Soulyemane, a man who lost three and half years of his life in detention, says he would rather be:

"In prison, because in prison you count the days down [till your release]. In detention, you count the days up."

Now Let me turn back to our parasha. What wisdom can we glean from this week's portion?

Sarah, our first matriarch, has passed away at the age of 127. Abraham and Isaac are in mourning. Because Isaac is not married and has no children, Eliezer, Abraham's senior servant, is sent by Abraham to find a bride for Isaac. Faced with this challenging task, Eliezer devises a "test" to use in order to find a bride who is appropriate for Isaac. Eliezer said:

"Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink,

and I will also water your camels¹- let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. (Genesis 24:13-14)

Rebecca arrives at the well. Eliezer sees Rebecca and asks for a sip of water. Without hesitation, she invites him to drink. After he has quenched his thirst, she offers to draw water for his camels.

Rebecca's clothes, jewellery, figure, and face are not mentioned in the parashah. Rather, she is described by her actions.

Her behaviour demonstrates her kindness and character. She does not turn away from a stranger nor judge him.

What I take from this parasha is repeated through numerous idioms:

Actions speak louder than words.

It's what's on the inside that counts.

Or to put it in a Jewish context from Pirkei Avot - "Good deeds are better than wise sayings."

(Which ironically is a very wise saying)

This parasha reinforces the idea that it is deeds and actions that are valued over mere platitudes...

This topic is the subject of a famous dispute between Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva

'Which is greater, study or action? Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva answered, saying: Study is greater. All the rest agreed with Akiva that study is greater than action because it leads to action.'

The value of study here is that it leads to action. Study is vital, but only when action is attached. Both action and study are demeaned if their vital mutual connection is forgotten.

René Cassin is an organisation that takes this dual responsibility seriously

As does NPLS as a community.

It is a community that embodies commitment to the relationship between study and action.

This is a community that not only proudly said 'refugees welcome', but also through multiple donations, acted on these words.

This is a community whose Rabbis have not only been to Harmondsworth detention centre, and met with those held in detention, but have also helped campaign for a time limit.

It is this emphasis that I believe has led NPLS to run their Mitzvah Day on the 22nd of November differently this year, working with René Cassin to focus on the issue of indefinite detention...

At the beginning of the parsha when Abraham is searching for a plot of land to bury his wife, Abraham refers to himself as a 'Ger Toshav', a resident alien, or in other words, a recognised immigrant.

Had Abraham arrived to the UK in 2015 he may have been locked up indefinitely just down the road from here.

On the 22nd November, we'll be joined by some modern day Abrahams - members of the group Freed Voices, who are a group of experts by experience on detention; we'll hear directly what it was like to go through the detention system and what life is like after detention.

I am privileged to be here on Rabbi Harry Jacobi's 90th birthday. He recently wrote about some of his experiences as a refugee and asylum seeker in the Jewish news. His words and

experience run parallel to the experience of many both in his generation and sadly also today.

On the 22nd of November we will be joined by Mr Fritz Lustig, a 96 year old man, who like Harry, left Europe to the UK. Like 10,000s of Jews during the Second World War he was detained on the Isle of Man. The point is not to directly equate the experience of the 1940s to today, as there are numerous differences between that experience and the modern incarnation of detention, but one uniting factor is the portrayal of asylum seekers in negative terms by the media. Today, it is inconceivable to think of those fleeing the Nazis as bogus or illegal asylum seeker, even if was appropriate to label any human being 'illegal' - we must be absolutely clear that genuine asylum seekers do not only exist in the past.

So friends, I ask you to join us on the 22nd for a Mitzvah Day that will be different from all other mitzvah days...

I will be around during Kiddish to talk to anyone who has any further questions

I look forward to seeing you on the 22nd where we will listen to the voices of those who have been in captivity,



We will study - but more importantly than that – we will consider how we can move from study to action.

Shabbat Shalom.