

## The Jewish experience of WW1 and the Centenary of the Treaty of Versailles

Shabbat shalom Rabbi Nicole, Rabbi Misha, ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys,

Thank you for again asking me to speak on this shabbat Noach - in anticipation of Remembrance Day, 11 November - about the Jewish experience of World War One and also the Centenary of the Treaty of Versailles.

I have had to significantly redact this drasha from the presentations I gave earlier this year to NAJEX at the SJM and originally to Limmud Oz. And I struggled to find a connection with this morning's Sedra and the story of Noah ... but I suppose I could do worse than reflect on a series of new beginnings:

1. Rosh Hashana;
  2. on shabbat Hol Hamoed Sukkot, exactly 2 weeks ago: the birth of our new grandson, Patrick James Allen – *Yochanan Pinchas ben Eliyahu Dovid v'Rivkah*;
  3. the Centenary of the Peace Treaty of Versailles,
- and 4. today's Sedra:

G-d gave the world a second chance, after the catastrophic flood, using Noah's unlikely seafaring skills.

OK ... now let's go back – not 105 generations, just 105 years - to 1914:

From his pulpit at the Great Synagogue, military chaplain and English-born Rabbi Francis Cohen, exhorted young Jewish Australian men to do their duty and enlist *“to join the fight for King and Country”* – **not unlike his rabbinical colleagues in the synagogues of all the warring nations** – as I will explain later.

And, as I say in the Preface to Mark Dapin's *Jewish Anzacs*, *“Jews came from all corners of Australia and the globe - from Albany to Zeehan, from Aberdeen (Scotland) to Vilna (Lithuania) - and willingly enlisted for duty in the Australian forces. Chaplain Rev. David Freedman reported from France in 1916 that ‘The Jew is here, too, side by side with his fellow-citizens, striving, fighting and dying for the sacred cause of the British Empire.’”*

There were two Jewish sailors aboard HMAS *Sydney*, including sick-berth attendant Jack **Levy**, when she was dispatched from the 1914 convoy to engage the German cruiser, SMS *Emden*. At least one of the 133 crew of 376, lost from the *Emden* at Cocos Island, was a German-Jewish sailor, Gustav **Levy**.

As Mark notes, *“The Battle of Cocos was likely the first time Australian Jews faced other Jews in combat, in a fratricidal clash of Levy versus Levy.”*

Comparable stories were told in Europe, where there was a much higher – but still negligible – chance of two Jews facing each other on the battlefield. One example relates to Issy Smith, who was the second of 5 English Jews to receive the Victoria Cross in WW1. Born Isaac Shmeilowitz in Egypt, he spent 2 years in Australia before re-enlisting in the British Army at the outbreak of war, so some people even claim that he was the first ‘Australian’ VC winner.

Apparently, *“At Neuve Chapelle in France, Smith captured a German, and was just on the point of bayonetting him, when something held him back. He did not bayonet the man, but took him prisoner, and placed him where the prisoners were received. .... There, on searching the man, Smith found that the German was wearing a Jewish token.”*

I will return to that topic later, as for the moment we continue the nautical theme, sailing to Egypt on HMAT *Suffolk* with three Sydney friends - Julius Bloom, Harold Herman and Godfrey Levy – who had enlisted together. Unlike the biblical Noah, who was trying to avoid danger, these three were heading towards it. But just like Noah could not escape G-d’s sight, during their voyage, Julius Bloom’s *“Conduct contrary to good order and discipline,”* was witnessed by Lt Berrol Mendelsohn – also Jewish - *“namely: striking matches in a hammock between decks, after ‘lights out’.”*

Whilst training in Egypt in early 1915, many of the Jewish diggers attended services in the Shuls of Alexandria and Cairo – but apparently not in sufficient number for all of the local Jews to take a visitor home for shabbat dinner!

There were approximately 200 Jewish diggers at Gallipoli over the course of the campaign, one of whom, Leonard Keysor earned a VC in the Battle of Lone Pine for throwing Turkish bombs back at them non-stop for 50 hours.

The 5th Brigade HQ near Anzac Cove, where Sgt Julius Neustadt served with his cousin, Sgt Jack Marks Levy, seems to have been a focus of Jewish life on Gallipoli.

Neustadt kept a diary. In October, Julius Bloom - also a cousin of his - told how, *“The Turks and Australians were interchanging friendly notes and salutations one morning above [the] parapet – one chap interpreting in French. [The] Turks sent over cigarettes and a note saying, ‘Although they were at war with the Australians – yet they were friends.’ They wanted some bully beef as they liked it (which was thrown over to them). [They] also asked us not to throw the cricket balls (bombs) as they did not like them. They signed themselves, ‘Your comrades in arms, the Turks’.”*

Neustadt continued to receive mail and visits from other Jewish troops, but he called *“Friday 5 Nov. one of the saddest days ... Harold Herman broke the news of the death of Julius Bloom. ... Near Quinn’s Post, Bloom was ... reading a letter he had just received from his mother, when a Turkish mine exploded under the trench.”*

Around that same time, Harold Herman also became a casualty, died on board a hospital ship and was buried at sea – the second of the three Sydney pals and one of the last of 36 Jewish diggers never to return from the Dardanelles.

Although roughly a quarter of the Jews enlisted as C of E or other religion - unlike most other nations, there is barely a trace of anti-Semitism occurring in the Australian military - save for the campaign against General John Monash by Charles Bean and Keith Murdoch.

By contrast, during his British Army recruitment tour, Issy Smith's status as a VC recipient did not prevent the owner of a Yorkshire restaurant from refusing to serve the Jewish soldier.

One of 12 Jewish Nurses from Australia that served overseas in WW1, was Leah Rosenthal of Melbourne, who was awarded the Associate Royal Red Cross for heroic conduct under shellfire. In 1917 she wrote home from France, of a Yom Kippur service near the front.

A year later, she reported that *“this Yom Kippur, the Rabbi had to improvise, using biscuit tins with a curtain in front of the Ark to hold the Torah.”*

Consider:

- there were only 18,000 Jews in Australia in 1914-18;
- around 9% of them enlisted - similar to the general population: nearly half of the eligible men – of whom almost 200 - approximately 1 in 7 – made the supreme sacrifice.

The impact at the time - and going forward - on the small Australian Jewish community of losing a young man almost every week of the war, is difficult for us to contemplate – let alone the loss of 60,000 Australians in total - one of the highest death rates of all the allied armies:

that is equivalent to a ‘Christchurch bombing’ or ‘Port Arthur massacre’ every day, for four years!?!

... Which is an appropriate segue into my next topic:

What of the Jews in enemy armies and the broader impact of WW1 on the Jews generally?

The allied powers lost around six million troops, the Central Powers four million dead. The number of Jews that fought is estimated between 1 and 1.5 million - of whom some 100 to 150 thousand died.

Note that figure is probably less than the number of Jewish civilians who were killed during the course of the war. The total military and civilian casualties, including wounded, is a mind-blowing 40 million people.

So, from a total of some 10 million Jews living there, perhaps **a million of Europe's Jews were casualties of the war.**

And their aspiration for a Jewish homeland was often supported by many anti-Semites in Germany and Russia, who saw it as a solution to the 'Jewish problem'!

It seems that, ironically, over the last century and a half,

*"The response of Antisemites to Zionism has moved: from strong support, through indifference, to obsessive opposition."*

For some men who fought both as citizens and as Jews, their overlapping identities could be complex. In 1914 the large *Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith* issued its own rallying call, while even the main Zionist organisation urged its members *"to serve the fatherland"*.

Following the invasion of Belgium in 1914, German Army *Feldrabbiner* Bruno Italiener, proclaimed that the outbreak of war had undoubtedly made Germans a *"better, more mature people."* Soon after, the Rabbi prayed with his soldiers at Yom Kippur services in the captured Brussels' synagogue.

At least 12,000 Jews died fighting for the Kaiser and thousands received the Iron Cross. There were dozens of German Jewish air aces, one of whom even flew with a swastika on his plane! The pilot, Fritz Beckhardt, had no idea that the ancient, ubiquitous symbol would be appropriated after the war by the National Socialists.

Another flying ace, Willy Rosenstein downed nine enemy aircraft. In the 1930's he moved to South Africa, from where his only son Ernest, joined the RAF in WW2 - only to be killed in action, flying his spitfire against his former countrymen.

In the Austro-Hungarian Army were three Jewish field-m Marshals, eight generals and dozens of Jewish clerics on the Eastern front – plus even kosher kitchens behind the lines! But the 5 million Jews living in the *Pale of Settlement* were caught in the bitter fighting on the Eastern Front – and suffered terribly. Still, the Russian army had some half million Jews in its ranks.

And therefore, a more likely chance of Jew meeting Jew on the battlefield .... Unlike Christians and Moslems, for the Jews however, the idea of Jew fighting Jew is more fraught.

The typical stories, commencing in the Napoleonic Wars, are often apocryphal: *“a Jew had bayoneted an enemy soldier, who, just before expiring, gasped the Shema.”* The killer, so the story goes, went mad.

Perhaps **the following stories are the basis** for the claim that Jewish soldiers from enemy armies said kaddish together at the grave of a fellow Jew.

On the Western Front, British Jew, Sgt Rathbone arranged for the Jewish burial of a captured German, Lt. Seller, who had been mortally wounded.

In another story, a Jewish Tommy named Stern killed a Hun at close range and then noticed a Star of David on the man’s neck. Stern was wracked by guilt. Later in the 1930’s, Stern - now a London solicitor and actively helping German Jews - takes on a German law-student, who was orphaned during the war. Not surprisingly - the young Jew turns out to be the son of the man that Stern had killed.....

But sadly, it isn’t surprising that, despite their loyalty and sacrifice, anti-Semitism against European Jews increased during WW1. False accusations of Jewish shirking and profiteering spread. That simply added to the lies about Jews supporting the enemy.

One crucial step toward scapegoating the Jews was the *“stab in the back”* myth, which originated in 1917 and gained even more traction throughout the 1920s – blaming the Jews for Germany’s defeat.

The resulting perplex notions were exemplified in an email that I myself received last year from a South Australian Jew, whose grandfather was one of the thousands of Jews who *“actually fought willingly and bravely on the other side during World War One - only to be slaughtered in the Shoah.”*

In November 1918 the war drew to a close as allied troops advanced. In response, the Imperial Navy mutinied. Meanwhile, there was also significant unrest among the German people, who realised that losing was inevitable. They were disillusioned with the politics and harsh conditions of war, and many lent their support to the extremist parties which had emerged all over Germany - revolution was underway.

On the 9 November, Kaiser Wilhelm II - Emperor of Germany and the Commander-in-Chief - was forced to abdicate and flee to Holland.

Power was handed to a government led by the leader of the left-wing Social Democratic Party, Friedrich Ebert. The armistice was agreed on the 11 November 1918 in a railway car at Compiegne, north of Paris.

Germany was not invited to contribute to the discussions about the peace treaty, that began in January 1919 between Britain, France and the USA. Known as The Treaty of Versailles, it was signed on 28 June 1919 – and despite extremely harsh conditions insisted by France – Germany had no option but to sign it, accepting complete responsibility for the war and to make massive concessions and reparation payments – leading to economic, social and political turmoil.

Less well-known were the 14 bilateral accords or ‘Little Versailles Treaties’ - such as the Polish Minority Treaty - signed by many of the smaller independent republics that emerged out of the rubble of the Great War.

The purpose of the minority treaties was to compel the new, in many cases ethnically-based, states to guarantee not only the human rights of minority groups – in most states this included a Jewish minority – but also to allow them significant autonomy. So, the fate of the Jews briefly occupied the attention of diplomats at Versailles ... but, what to do with them?

The Polish Minority Treaty contained clauses that guaranteed national minorities the right to use their own language – in schools, in the press and even in the courts. The treaty also had special “Jewish” clauses guaranteeing a proportional amount of public funding for Jewish schools, and also freedom from being forced to violate the Sabbath; for example, the holding of elections on Saturday. This was one of the reasons many Jews were anti-Zionist and served to confound the cause.

Also, the problem was that, although the treaties had provisions for enforcement through the newly established League of Nations, except for a handful of cases, the political will did not exist to prosecute violations of their terms. With no state willing to help and the British blocking most legal routes to Palestine, Jews found themselves trapped in new states that did not want to accept them into their national projects.

And ever the opportunist, Hitler blamed the Jews for all the misfortunes that had befallen Germany:

- the loss of the First World War was the result of a Jewish conspiracy,
- the Treaty of Versailles was also a Jewish conspiracy designed to bring Germany to her knees,

- and the hyperinflation of 1923 was the result of an international Jewish attempt to destroy Germany.

The rest, tragically, is history ...

I contend that, despite the fact that the European Jewish experience of WW1 was itself a profound catastrophe, the subject has been largely forgotten, if not ignored by historians – in stark contrast to earlier pogroms, the subsequent holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, which was the result of the League of Nations giving the mandate for Palestine to Britain, rather than France.

And what, if any, role did Australia play at Versailles?

Prime Minister Billy Hughes was determined that Australia's voice be heard at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, after being frustrated by Prime Minister David Lloyd George's exclusion of him from the British War Council's meeting the previous October, to discuss peace aims.

He also publicly crossed the lofty US President, Woodrow Wilson, in an exchange seen by observers as the *"little David facing the American Goliath"*. Chided by Wilson in the debate on the German Pacific colonies because Australia represented only a small country of five million people, Hughes replied simply: *"I speak for 60,000 [Australian] dead."*

Similarly, I feel strongly that the vital stories of Australian Jews - particularly those who served in the military – have been lost beneath the avalanche of Shoah stories – and that is not to demean the worth of those.

If there has been little communal interest in Australian Jewry's military role after WW2, there was even less interest in WW1. Moreover, whilst saluting our previous Jewish Anzacs, we must also remember that many Jews currently serve in the Australian Defence Forces – likely some 400.

In conclusion, I point to the stark contrast between, the Treaty of Versailles and the more benevolent treaties with Germany and Japan after WW2 - and the consequent contrasting outcomes.

Just like G-d provided through Noah a second chance to redeem the world, after the catastrophic flood:

history has shown how vital it is to show mercy on one's enemies, lest they, perhaps justifiably - even if not morally - respond with greater vengeance.

'LEST WE FORGET'      'ZACHOR'

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom