



ספר חכם לב

Rabbi Apple ^{on} the Parashah

Published in Honour of the Fiftieth Anniversary of his
Induction as Rabbi of The Great Synagogue, Sydney

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**A collection of thoughts on the weekly Parashah
by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple AO RFD.**

**Rabbi, The Great Synagogue, Sydney
1973-2005**

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to introduce this volume of thoughts on the weekly parashah taken from the writings of my distinguished predecessor, Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple, Emeritus Rabbi of The Great Synagogue, Sydney. It marks and celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of Rabbi Apple's induction as Rabbi, in February 1973, and is a tribute from the congregation he served so well for over more than three decades.

Rabbi Apple's thirty two years at the Synagogue were a time of growth and progress, including celebrating the Synagogue's centenary in 1978, opening the Education Centre in 1981 and the AM Rosenblum Museum in 1982, and beginning the Oz Torah email list in 1995. At the core of his congregational work were the hundreds of celebrations and commemorations when Rabbi Apple supported his congregants, the inspiration he gave them in sermons and classes and the listening ear he gave them when they needed it. All this was alongside a very busy role in the wider community, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

Since Rabbi Apple retired from The Great Synagogue in 2005 he has remained an active writer, through his Oz Torah emails and website, as well as popular and scholarly publications. This book fills a gap in Rabbi Apple's bibliography. Although he gave a weekly sermon for some forty-five years, and his writings on the weekly Torah reading have appeared electronically, they

have not been produced as a book. He has published historical studies, works on biblical figures from both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures, and memoirs, but his thoughts on the weekly parashah have never been collected in this form. Through this volume the reader can now look up what Rabbi Apple has to say about the parashah of the week. I am grateful to Rabbi Apple for making his writings available, and to Bension Apple for selecting and editing them.

The Hebrew title of this book Sefer Chacham Lev, the book of the wise-hearted, is a reference to Rabbi Apple's Hebrew name, Bezalel. The original Bezalel was the leading craftsman given the task of manufacturing the Tabernacle and its vessels. They were all described as wise of heart. Wisdom and whole heartedness are qualities of Rabbi Apple that were especially noted by the late Rabbi Sacks, who wrote a tribute on Rabbi Apple's retirement in 2005:

'Rabbi Raymond Apple is a jewel in the crown of the Jewish People...and is a role model of rabbinic leadership...accessible, understanding, generous and wise.

In an age of extremes, his is a voice of toleration...who understands the complexities of a situation and the varieties of human temperament, and is able to guide people forward, making each feel that he understands their needs.

He has served the synagogue, the Australian Jewish community and above all the Almighty, with all his heart and with all his soul.

Even fifty years after Rabbi Apple began his work in Sydney, and over sixty years since his first pulpit appointment, he continues to add to our understanding of Torah and the Jewish religion. We hope he will continue to do so for many more years in good health, with Marian and their family beside him.

Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton
Chief Minister, The Great Synagogue, Sydney



Preface: My Life with Words

Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple AO RFD

Words have been my lifetime preoccupation as a preacher, teacher, speaker and writer. As a writer I began as a boy with Letters to the Editor in Melbourne newspapers on topics ranging from local libraries to national immigration policy. Once, someone even wrote back urging me to be more Christian!

At Melbourne High School I ran a magazine for language students. Maybe the fact that my mother was a language teacher motivated my choice of school subjects. She unfortunately died when I was 16 but until then she corrected my essays in a range of languages and said I used too many adjectives. As a student I was a freelance reporter for the Jewish weeklies, even the Yiddishe Post. I knew very little Yiddish, though that was my father's mother-tongue. At communal meetings I got the gist of the Yiddish speeches and summed it up briefly in a few English sentences. The Yiddish editor turned my summary into a fully-fledged report. He knew his clientele and spelled out their views better than they did.

In those days I had not yet worked out what kind of writer I was – a reporter, a critic or an academic. Reporting had its attractions – and its problems, since I thought I was recording the truth, but then I found that truth can be manipulated. I tried

serious writing, inspired by my academic studies... but then I saw how ethically unreliable some authors are, and how facts can be fabricated and judgment distorted by populism and prejudice.

When I went to England to study I occasionally wrote for the Jewish Chronicle, which actually paid me for my articles! When I worked for the Association for Jewish Youth I wrote on Jewish subjects for their magazine, "Jewish Youth". Entering the rabbinate I kept on writing, but in greater depth. Herzl said he couldn't stop writing; neither could I.

As a rabbi in Britain and Australia I wrote prolifically for Jewish and general publications, and I edited other people's material. Hardly anyone paid me but I wrote because I enjoyed it. Thanks to my son Bensie I began OzTorah as a parshah sheet (a pioneer of that genre), which is now an on-line contributor to Jewish thinking, syndicated globally with hundreds of readers. It is a constantly evolving book with an archive which is constantly consulted: I even use it myself. At times I find that the expert on a subject seems to be me. I also sometimes recognize what other people claim to have written; if they are rabbis I wonder if they know the halakhah about plagiarism...

Louis Jacobs said that a writer should never write the same book twice. Nonetheless I can and do address the same subject over and over again. As an example, I have been writing about Rosh HaShanah for years and my OzTorah has a growing archive on countless subjects, forming an online book that can be described in Kohelet's words, "The writing of many books has no end". I plan and dream OzTorah in my sleep.

Not that I have abandoned conventional books. In retirement I have time for the study and research that was a luxury when I worked long hours and sometimes gave seven speeches a day. I have now written several books and many academic and popular articles. My kop still works (Barukh HaShem) and I have many literary ideas and draft manuscripts which might never see daylight or print because publishers want subsidies, which is hard for a pensioner. I guess the ideas and manuscripts will outlive me.

I fear that the print media might not survive (though communications technology probably will!). It's not only email and the social media which are the challenge. Newspapers are under threat since their "news" is often stale when we see it, though as Morris Laub says, they provide "a written record, a fuller account, an analytical approach, a commentator's view". But they need money, and there is a shrinking pool of advertisers. Everyone can access the latest data without paying for it.

Historians are especially endangered. If people don't write, if they don't make notes or keep records, the raw materials of history will vanish and events will

evaporate. Libraries will go out of business, though religious books will survive because Shom'rei Shabbat will give their electronic devices a weekly sabbatical.

Back to me. What sort of writer did I turn out to be? A reporter, a critic, an academic? All of them and more. I am not a deep or dynamic thinker but I believe Judaism has something to say and I enjoy saying it.

Though I can't make a living from writing, I believe in the Jewish idea of writers-without-pay. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says in the Talmud that the Men of the Great Assembly prayed that scribes should not become rich, because then they might stop writing. In my case I hope to be busy with pen and word processor for quite a while yet. My handwriting has deteriorated, both in English and Hebrew, but (thank God) I still have a mind – and a computer which keeps me working, thanks to my grandchildren.



Worlds in collision – B'reshit

The middle of the 20th century saw the publication of Immanuel Velikovsky's "Worlds in Collision". It caused a storm.

His theme: that Biblical miracles were caused by cataclysmic events in Nature. Whatever explanations the Bible gave, said Velikovsky, other ancient peoples had their own ideas. But according to Velikovsky, most of the ancient theories were far off the truth.

It was Nature that was really responsible for the great events that so impressed ancient man. It was not Moses' rod that opened the Red Sea; when the sea opened, it was because of a cosmic disturbance.

A comet which later became Venus came close to the earth, enveloped the atmosphere in gaseous vapours, reversed the polarity of the magnetic poles, changed the earth's orbit and disturbed the normal functioning of Nature.

When the water turned to blood, it was not genuine blood but only looked like it. It was really rust from the tail of the comet that entered the waters of the earth.

Biblical man, however, lacked the scientific training to identify what had

happened and used the religious language of miracles to describe the occurrence.

Why I am writing about Velikovsky's book is not to endorse or reject his ideas or to pretend to scientific knowledge, but to illustrate the popular contention that science and religion are, like the title of the book, "worlds in collision".

When people are brought up to believe that science must be right about everything (though they can't always explain which science they are talking about, or which stage in the history of science), they dismiss the Bible and religion as not knowing what they are talking about.

Yet the fact is that the Bible does not purport to teach science: it teaches religion. Its vocabulary is God, belief, morality, vision and hope. When something happened, it must have been God's will. Nothing was accidental.

"And God said" is the Biblical axiom. Everything is an expression of Divine intention and power. God is entitled to harness whatever energies of Nature He desires.

We call it a miracle, but that is theological shorthand.

Refuge in an ark – No'ach

It was touch and go for No'ach and his family.

All around them was deluge and devastation. Their ark, buffeted on all sides by the elements, could have become their Titanic.

But though the rest of civilisation was overtaken by the destruction, the No'ach family came out alive. They emerged from the ark and began to rebuild history.

God had determined that they would survive, and survive they did – and all because of an ark that gave them shelter and protection.

The rabbis say, *ma'asei avot siman labanim* – "the deeds of the fathers are an augury for their children", and this, like many a Biblical narrative, seems to be a parable of later events.

The Jewish experience has echoed the No'ach story too many times to count. Buffeted by hostility on every side, the Jewish people may well have doubted whether Jews and Judaism would survive into the future.

Had it not been for centuries of unrelenting persecution, we should now have numbered hundreds of millions. The

world, and we have to say it was largely the Christian world, did all it could to bring Jewish history to an end.

Yet God, who determined that No'ach would live to face another day, determined that the Jewish people, though with numbers tragically depleted, would survive what Shakespeare calls "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune".

Like No'ach, our means of survival was an ark. Our ark was, however, an Ark with a capital A – the Ark of the Torah. Clinging to the life of Torah gave us a rallying-point, a purpose, an identity.

Not that the Ark was a physical shield against the cruelty of riot, massacre, pogrom and Holocaust, but it was our means of defiance and determination not to give in.

Kol HaKavod to the firmness of our ancestors. But the struggle is not over. Not so much physically but spiritually and culturally.

If we want to be Jews tomorrow, there is only one way – not to demean, dilute or downgrade the Ark and its sacred contents. Unless we live with Torah we do not live as Jews.

God in the diaspora – Lech L'cha

Migration has two aspects – movement from, and movement to.

We find this in Lech L'cha. God says to Abram, “Leave your land”. He also says, “Go to the land I shall show you” (Gen. 12:1 etc.). He adds, “To your descendants will I give the land” (Gen. 12:7).

The rabbis, utilising a verse in Vayikra (“To give you the land of Canaan, to be your God”: Lev. 25:38), explain (Ket. 110b), that this means, “There alone will I be your God”, with the deduction that one who lives in Israel has a God, and one who lives outside Israel has no God.

The Talmud immediately protests, “Has a person, then, who does not live in the Land no God?” We echo the protest and make two questions out of it.

Not only, “Is it really true that anyone who lives outside Israel has no God?” But, “Is it true that everyone who lives in Israel is a believer?”

The sociological facts of our generation surely recognise that some, however few or many, Israelis are secular and atheistic, and many, whatever the full figures, of the Jewish people in the Diaspora are committed religious believers who lead a life of observance of the commandments.

We have to find a solution to the conundrum or else we will constantly wonder what motivated the sages to make an apparently preposterous assertion.

Can it be that what we are being told is that life in Israel has a flavour that at least sporadically turns every Israeli into a believer, and that there is always going to be a missing dimension in the spirituality of the Diaspora?

Deciding for yourself – Vayyera

Hineni – “Here I am” – is the name of an organisation created by the famous Rebbetzin Jungreis with the aim of showing a personal commitment to Judaism and the Jewish future.

The name Hineni comes from the response of Abraham when God called on him to go onto the mountain (Gen. 22:1).

Rashi quotes the rabbinic comment that Hineni is the way the righteous respond to God with humility and willingness.

Being a tzaddik, Abraham would naturally say Hineni. But if someone is not such a tzaddik, they might react in a different way and insist on making their own decisions, choosing to do what was right in their own eyes, to which the Torah does not take too kindly (Deut. 12:8).

Being a law unto yourself may be an expression of autonomy and individualism, but it can gravely endanger society. Detach yourself from accepted norms and standards and do only what you yourself fancy, and you risk causing chaos for civilisation.

This is so axiomatic in Jewish thinking that for all our obvious dedication to the dignity of the individual we cannot possibly approve of people always doing their own thing.

There is also a danger in people excluding themselves from the community.

Judaism emphasises the importance of both the individual and the community. But when the community needs the individual, everyone must be there to be counted and counted on.

If the minyan needs you and you decline to be the tenth man, the sages say you are a bad neighbour. If you have a talent which you refuse to make available to society, you are like the bottle of scent to which the Midrash refers when it says that one should be Abraham, who shared his insights with the world, and not like the person who says, “I am keeping my bottle of scent to myself”.

A practical illustration of the problem is those in a community who do not affiliate to a congregation, give nothing either in money or involvement towards the maintenance of community services, and then expect that the rabbis and facilities of the congregation will automatically be made available to them when needed.

Example: “I came to the synagogue on Kol Nidrei night and they would not let me in because I wasn’t a member”... If everyone decided not to be a member there would be no synagogue or service.

Example: “My family do not belong to a shule, but why was it so hard to find a minister to conduct my relative’s funeral?”... Ministers do their best if they have time, but their first priority is their own congregants.

Certainly, if there are financial problems and someone simply cannot afford membership fees every assistance is given without question – but what about those who can afford to belong and do not bother, relying on the kindly nature of the rabbi/minister/congregation when needed?

Fair is fair!

The mark of a good marriage

– Chayyei Sarah

Abraham was a fussy parent. Not every girl was good enough for his son. It had to be someone who had yichus (lineage) – the right yichus.

“You shall not take a wife for my son,” Abraham says to his servant Eliezer, “from the daughters of the Canaanites... but you shall go to my country, to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac” (Gen. 24:3-4).

This seems to have been the Jewish principle throughout history.

The Mishnah puts into the mouth of the daughters of Jerusalem the advice, “Young man, lift up your eyes and see what you would choose for yourself. Set not your eyes on beauty, but set your eyes on family, for ‘Favour is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised’ (Prov. 31:30)” (Ta’anit 4:8).

Not that beauty is irrelevant, but family is a very significant consideration. Hence the rabbinic saying, “A person should sell all he has in order to marry the daughter of a scholar”.

Yichus is still very important in some circles. Rabbis often get telephone calls from across the world asking what they know of a particular family whose son or daughter overseas is someone’s prospective shidduch.

Other views are held in society generally, and family background is viewed as a quaint notion that has little relevance when a couple are in love.

But it would be an immense pity if yichus fell entirely by the wayside. If you know a person is from a good family it is likely that they will have been brought up with standards and values and their character has been formed in the right sort of atmosphere.

This is one of the reasons why there is a Jewish doctrine of z’chut avot – the merit of the ancestors. We do not worship our ancestors, but if we are wise we will recognise that good ancestry lays up spiritual, cultural and moral capital that many generations can draw upon.

Hence each of us should ensure that we create such a milieu at home and bring up our children with such a firm basis of faith and values that the future will benefit.

And if it happens that someone is unfortunate enough to lack this type of yichus?

Remember what is said to have happened in the House of Lords when a snooty old-timer asked a new peer, “And whose descendant are you?”, only to receive the answer, “I am nobody’s descendant. I am an ancestor!”

Truth & religion – Tol’dot

Esau and Jacob were brothers and rivals. Their enmity began before their birth and it ruled their lives for many decades.

It was reinforced when Esau sold his birthright to his brother, and compounded when Jacob gained the father’s blessing that was really meant for Esau.

When Esau realised that the blessing was a fait accompli, he cried bitterly to Isaac, “Have you only one blessing, my father? Bless me, me too, my father!” (Gen. 27:38).

In a world of many rival religions, each could echo Esau’s question and address it to the Heavenly Father. Does God have only one blessing, only one true religion?

Arnold Toynbee said that all religions are alike seeking to respond to universal spiritual feelings and needs.

So why do they disagree on so many things?

Are they all equally valid... or equally invalid?

To claim they are all equally true is to trivialise and erase the things that make them distinctive. To say they are all equally false is to consign them all to the scrap-heap.

We have no choice but to say that each one is right... for its own adherents.

But almost all make the further, dogmatic claim that they alone possess absolute

truth and the whole world should and must adopt it.

To bring their views into the democratic marketplace of ideas is one thing, but to proselytise coercively is to deny others the right to their own conscience and convictions.

To God we can leave the problem of why He has made us different in faith and commitment. But not everything has to be left to God.

“The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth has He given to the children of men”, the Psalmist says. There is a heavenly agenda... and an earthly responsibility.

That responsibility works in concentric circles.

The innermost circle is particularistic and concerns the internal affairs and dynamics of our own traditions.

Beyond it is the outer circle of shared inter-religious challenge in which we all work together.

That challenge insists that instead of, God forbid, fighting one another, we find common cause and fight together to bring spiritual insights to the task of peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all mankind.

Finding faith: Jacob & the ladder

– Vayyetzei

Jacob's famous dream was of a ladder linking earth and heaven. The angels of the Lord went up and down, connecting the earthly and the heavenly realms.

How could Jacob be afraid, knowing that the Divine messengers were with him and God was aware of his situation? Jacob's faith said, HaShem li v'lo ira – "The Lord is with me: I shall not fear".

The same faith sustained the patriarch's descendants throughout the centuries. "The Lord is with me: I shall not fear" was a Jacob's ladder for millions of Jews through millennia of time.

That is, according to some critics, until our present age, when some have said that the Jew has become "Jacob without the ladder".

This seems to suggest a person who has come adrift from God. Possibly it is God who has cast man adrift and left him to suffer alone. Possibly it is man who has cast God adrift and decided he can manage by himself.

After 11 September one well-known American religious leader used this terminology in relation to the twin towers disaster.

She asked why any modern person could imagine that the tragedy showed that God did not care, when for so long man had proclaimed his self-sufficiency and told God to keep out of human affairs.

Jews have a different problem. Until the Holocaust the vast majority of Jews were believers, certain there was a God and that God would protect His people. There was no thought that God had no place in history, no thought of Jacob abandoning his ladder.

Then came the catastrophe. Many who had been religious now lost patience with God. What kind of God was He, they said, when He let His people down at precisely the moment when He was needed?

It was once the nations that said, "Where is your God?" (Psalm 19:10). Now the Jews themselves said, "God, where are You?"

Decades of Holocaust theology have tried to find an answer. Some blame the Jews themselves for supposed sins that range from assimilation to anti-Zionism. Some say that God cannot grant free will without running the risk that evil nations and ideologies will misuse it. Some say it is God testing our faith as He tested our ancestor Abraham.

The theories are innumerable and none seems to bring much comfort. Seventy years after the event there are still Jews who cannot say "The Lord is with me", who cannot believe in Jacob's ladder.

Some call this a holy loss of faith. Jews argue with God, but somehow they keep talking to Him.

It's tempting to brush aside Jacob's ladder but they are trying not to. They know that their ancestors were able to say with Job, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him" (Job 13:15).

As Rashi puts it, "Even though He slay me, I will not be separated from Him but will constantly hope in Him. There is no running away or rebellion in my words."

Strategy for survival

– Vayyishlach

In modern terms we would say that Jacob was a good strategist.

Fearing Esau's attack, he divided his family and entourage into two camps, so that if one was attacked the other would escape (Gen. 32:8).

The idea may have come to him from the two camps of angels, described only a few verses earlier at the end of last week's sidra (Gen. 32:3).

The sages (Gen. Rabba 76:2) saw merit in the Jacob strategy, and they gave it a wider application: "A person should not put all his money in one corner" – or, as the proverb says, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket".

The Ramban, utilising a Midrash in Gen. Rabba 76:3, sees this passage as an augury of what would happen in later Jewish history.

Jacob would be in danger from Esau in later generations. But Esau's enmity would never wipe out the whole people. One camp would be attacked, but the other would survive.

No-one needs to tell us, centuries later, how grievously we have suffered from a succession of Esaus, whose hostility led to such hatred and horror and culminated in the Holocaust.

Rightly do we weep. Rightly do we mourn. But what we should never forget to do is also to celebrate the survival of the "other

camp", including those who arose out of the destruction and lived.

In a sense we are all survivors. Our lives, and Jewish history as a whole, remain for ever scarred by Esau, but we are alive, Israel is a reality, and Judaism refuses to die.

There are survivors of the Sho'ah who still feel they, too, should have perished. But they did not perish! Every day they should be like the Jew described by Emil Fackenheim who drinks a l'chayyim at the Western Wall and proclaims the day as a yom-tov because he is alive.

There is a message here for those who, rightly determined that the memory must not fade, have created Holocaust memorials and museums which commemorate, record, remind and warn. But no-one should be allowed to go away with the feeling that Jewish history more or less ended in 1945.

Since then there has been over half a century of magnificent achievement. Miracle has piled on miracle. Am Yisrael chai, says the slogan – "The people of Israel lives!" The faith, the tradition, the heritage of Israel also lives, and Jews are rediscovering it every day.

The other camp has survived. Not without its often serious problems. But whilst we have ample reason for concern, we have abundant reason for rejoicing.

My father's shoes – Vayyeshev

The sidra opens with the statement that Jacob dwelt in the land where his father had lived (Gen. 37:1).

A couple of weeks ago we read something similar about Jacob's own father, Isaac, who found water by re-digging the wells which his father Abraham had dug (Gen. 26:15). It seems that Biblical thinking believes in following in your father's footsteps.

But following your parents' example has its limits.

The great educator, Dr Matthew Arnold, said that there were two things we ought to learn from history: "One, that we are not in ourselves superior to our fathers; another, that we are shamefully and monstrously inferior to them, if we do not advance beyond them".

The patriarchs would have agreed that they were not intrinsically better than

their fathers, and they took it for granted that there was benefit to be gained from renewing their forebears' experiences.

Yet each patriarch in his own way moved beyond his predecessors. As Alexander the Great said, each had his own victories to win.

All of us have to tackle the problems of our own generation, but in many ways and on many occasions we can derive much help from the precedents of the past.

In my own case, even though I am far from a clone of my parents, I often ask myself what my father would have done in a given situation, or what my mother would have thought or said. I do not automatically follow their example, but it instructs me.

A son who made me forget

– Mikketz

Biblical children were rarely given recycled names. Instead, the parents created names which summed up their feelings and hopes.

Hence Joseph called his first-born son Menashe, from a root that means “to forget”. He explained, “God has made me forget my troubles” (Gen. 41:51).

We sympathise with Joseph. After so many trials and tribulations, why would he not want to put it all behind him? On the other hand, how could he forget his tzarot completely?

Samson Raphael Hirsch solves the problem by changing the translation. “To forget”, he says, is not the only meaning of the root n-sh-h. Another possible meaning is “to be a creditor”, and the verse can therefore read, “God has made my troubles into creditors” – i.e. “I owe it to my misfortunes to appreciate my joy all the more”.

An ingenious suggestion, supported by the fact that Joseph called his second son Ephraim, from a root that means “to be fruitful”.

Joseph explained this name too, saying, “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction”.

It is not that Joseph has forgotten all that happened to him – who could? – but he has moved on and found a way to flourish despite the burden of memory.

The post-Holocaust generation is in a sense like Joseph. No-one and nothing could make them forget. No-one and nothing can take the past away from them.

They remember but they do not brood and live in the past. Like Joseph, they have built and created for the future – new homes, new hopes, new families, all made the more precious because of the suffering of the past.

The Jerusalem frame-up

– Vayyiggash

Benjamin is in trouble, accused of a wrong he did not commit. Judah steps forward to plead on his behalf. It is Joseph, their own brother, who hears the plea, but so far the brothers are not aware of Joseph’s identity.

Judah begins his speech with exquisite courtesy and restraint. Gradually, says the Midrash, his voice becomes so loud that he is roaring.

What is he determined to say in tones so loud and clear? That it is all a massive frame-up, and Benjamin must not be allowed to be taken away from his father. The unfairness, the injustice of it all has to be got across.

And so effective is Judah’s wrath that Joseph has to give way, reveal his identity and let Benjamin go.

What a parable of the major problem that Israel is facing at this crucial moment in history. Jerusalem is on the agenda. Its name means City of Peace, but its status is the subject of a growing war of words.

Though important for all the monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is uniquely attached to the history, experience, aspirations and destiny of the Jewish people. As it has been said, the Jews never forsook Jerusalem and Jerusalem never forsook the Jews.

Teddy Kollek said, “Jews care immensely about Jerusalem. The Christians have Rome and Canterbury and even Salt Lake City; Muslims have Mecca and Medina. But the Jews have only Jerusalem, and only the Jews have made it their capital. That is why it has so much deeper a meaning for them than for anybody else...”

Yitzhak Rabin said, “Three thousand years of dreams and prayers today wrap Jerusalem in love and bring close Jews of every generation – from the fires of the Inquisition to the ovens of Auschwitz, and from all corners of the earth – from Yemen to Poland.”

But voices are heard – from those who should know better – urging that the barbed wire should come back to sever one part of the city from the other, leaving Israel with only half a city.

For years already we have heard the even more grotesque allegation that not even half the city belongs to Israel and Israel has no right to call any part of Jerusalem its capital.

It’s a shame that the voice of united Jerusalem itself is not heeded, Judah-like, with its message, “What you are saying about me is a frame-up, and you know it”. Jerusalem is one city and it cannot and must not be dismembered.

There is no evidence that Israel has denied freedom of access or religious tolerance to any of the minority religions that have their presence in the city. There is no evidence that Israel is incapable of governing the whole city justly with proper regard to the rights and needs of all its inhabitants.

It is another historic frame-up to suggest that redividing the city would bring peace.

Joseph heeded the roar of Judah. Today’s world needs to heed the roar of Jerusalem that says, “Leave me in peace!”

The hardest thing to say – Vayyechi

The name of the sidra is Vayyechi, “And he (Jacob) lived”, but its content is the death of Jacob, not his life.

No subject has fascinated mankind more, in every age and culture, than that of death. It is the great certainty. Since Adam’s sin, all have known they must die. None is exempt.

A Simchat Torah piyyut says, “Moses died, who shall not die?” Indeed, without death, says the Midrash, one generation would never make way for another: so death has to be part of God’s pattern for history.

There is no immunity from sorrow. Death is part of life. The people you love can die, and do.

But with all our millennia of experience of death, it remains a great mystery. What is it to die? What is death? Is it an end, or a transition?

In Judaism we have our axiom that there is a life after this one, but we do not encourage speculation about its nature. We have no empirical evidence to rely on. Death is the great enemy – but for some, the great friend.

Why is it an enemy? Because life is precious and must be cherished as long as possible. Life is good, and God-given, and even the dying person is deemed fully alive to the final moment. And every advance in medical science which enables us to hold on to life and ward off the attacks of death, is a triumph.

But to some, death is, philosophically, the great friend. That is, they value Olam Haba (the World to Come) more than Olam Hazeh (this world).

This, however, is not normative Judaism. The better Jewish view is that an hour of good deeds in this world is better than all the life of the World to Come. Yet, existentially, the person who is suffering unbearably will sometimes yearn for death as friend rather than enemy.

Death is the great moment of aloneness. Franz Rosenzweig in his “Star of Redemption” observes that though most things in life are experienced in company, each one of us dies alone.

The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 4:5) lists reasons why Adam was created alone; we might add to them the notion that man was created alone to show that at the final moment, the human community we know on earth is left behind and we are on our own.

How characteristically Jewish this thought is. What, after all, is the Hebrew word for a funeral? It is levayah, or halvayat hamet – “accompanying the dead”. But what it signifies is not only that we honour the departed by accompanying the remains, but also that we can only go a small part of the way. Then we have to turn around and go back... without the departed.

For the living, that is a searing, tragic moment of aloneness. Nothing is as painful, as brutal, as shockingly realistic as what has been called “unlearning the expected presence of the departed”.

The moment when the ways diverge and the dead go their way and the living go theirs, is hard for both of them.

When people have loved each other they dream of being together for ever. Nobody wants the bond to be broken. Yet the fact is that no-one can escape death. Nor can anyone organise the moment and circumstances of their death.

There is no way of avoiding the summons to give back one’s life – though we can and must cherish every moment of living and hope that God will allow our living to be prolonged and extended.

The nurses at a London hospice report that one of their patients said: “It’s not so much that you lose anything here, but bit by bit you have to give things back. You give back your sight. You give back your hearing. You give back your friends. Then one day you finish by giving back yourself.”

It recalls the famous story of Beruriah and her husband Rabbi Meir. When their two sons died on Shabbat, she did not tell him immediately.

Finally, when he insisted on knowing where the sons were, she told him by way of parable. Someone entrusted her with previous jewels, she said, and now sought them back. What should she do? Obviously they had to be returned, said her husband, and he understood what she was telling him (Midrash Mishlei to 31:1).

For the family as well as the dying patient it is a moment of agony. Who wants to welcome sorrow? Yet sorrow, as Morris Adler put it, is the obverse side of love. If you want to avoid sorrow, then you must never dare to love. If you want to love, you risk the sorrow of parting.

This is how Jim Anderson explained it: The hardest things to say

hello
I love you
goodbye.

To say hello
is to begin to say “I love you”
is to begin to say “goodbye”.

To protect yourself from “goodbye” by never saying “hello” is no answer to anything. Martin Buber said, “All real life is meeting”. You can’t live without “hello”, even though you risk having to say “goodbye”.

So what is bereavement? It is the discovery that we really cannot accompany each other any further, that now each must go their own way, that we can’t walk together any longer.

If anything in Judaism symbolises this moment of truth it is when the mourner takes the shovel and throws earth on the coffin in the grave.

Leo Jung has written about the brutality of that moment. That is when one knows and can no longer avoid the recognition of what has happened.

All of us eventually learn we cannot any longer walk together with a dear one. But in a spiritual sense, the dear one never dies if the thought of them lives in and with us.

A further important observation is made by Joshua Loth Liebman. He says, “It is the knowledge that our years are limited which makes them so precious.”

We must hope, trust, pray and yearn that we will be together tomorrow, but we must appreciate and celebrate each other today.



To be an Australian Jew – Sh'mot

The daughters of Jethro need assistance at the well and Moses is able to help them.

Home they go and say, "An Egyptian man saved us from the hand of the shepherds and he drew water for us" (Ex. 2:19).

They do not call him an Israelite; they have no idea he is a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that his parents were Amram and Yocheved, or that he is a person of principle. All we hear is that he is an Egyptian man.

How did they know he was Egyptian? They must have seen Egyptian characteristics – clothes, speech, mannerisms.

And this raises a fascinating modern question. It is usually obvious that an Australian Jew is Australian, a South African Jew a South African, an American Jew an American. Most of us are recognisable with minimal difficulty. A visitor only needs to say "Shabbat Shalom" and you immediately know where they come from.

But Pinchas Peli points out that in the USA Jews are the only ethnic group who are referred to as "American Jews", unlike other groups who are called "Italian Americans" or "Irish Americans".

Stating our geography before our Jewishness may be a semantic accident, but it is more likely that it arose out of Jewish ambiguity in the Diaspora.

Peli recounts the story of David Ben Gurion meeting Leon Blum, the former prime minister of France. Blum lost no time in saying he was "first of all a Frenchman, then a socialist and only then a Jew". Ben Gurion

retorted, "It is quite all right, Monsieur Blum; you most likely know that in Hebrew we read from right to left...!"

The question addressed in this exchange was which part of one's identity was uppermost.

Once, finding a way through two worlds led some to emphasise one, some the other. Today more and more people are comfortable with both sides of their identity. We are Jewish – and Australian; Australian – and Jewish. But the question remains: what do I mention first – Australian" or "Jew"? Perhaps the order does not matter?

There are two issues – whether my geography is good for my Jewishness and vice-versa, and what to do if geography threatens Jewishness.

Judaism goes well with an enlightened, democratic society. More: the history, flavour and even climate of a country all influence its Judaism, as do its values; a tragic illustration is Hermann Cohen's insistence early this century that the German and the Jewish ethos were alike and akin. More accurate is the Anglo-Jewish belief that British and Jewish principles go well together.

The problem is when the policies of a given country are ethically questionable.

The Tanya, in dealing with distracting or "opposing" thoughts during prayer, says such thoughts should not ruin one's concentration but evoke even greater determination to pray properly. Similarly in a culture like ancient Egypt (and there are modern equivalents), a Jew should work all the more on being a good Jew and raising the ethical quality of society.

Do I have a choice? – Va'era

Do I really have a say in what happens in my life?

If I search this week's sidra for an answer, it might appear to support the old saying, Alles is bescherrt – "all is preordained".

The sidra talks about Pharaoh and not about me, but the principle ought to be the same. It says in the name of God, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (Ex. 7:3). The implication seems to be that Pharaoh's hard-heartedness was God's doing and that he had no say in the matter.

Yes, it is true Pharaoh had previously hardened his own heart, but why does God now step in and turn him into a royal puppet on a string?

The long-established principle of Jewish theology is enunciated by Rabbi Akiva, who said, "All is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven" (Avot 3:15).

It sounds like a paradox. It is saying both that we have and do not have free will, and how can both assertions be true?

One answer is to distinguish between the external event – i.e. what happens to us, which is often beyond our control – and the internal event – i.e. how we handle what happens to us. Even so the subject bristles with difficulties, but it is still a helpful approach.

Mr Micawber always hoped that something good would be just around the corner, but he could not be certain.

Nor can we or anyone else be certain of what is round the corner, because most of the time it is not up to us. But our moral and spiritual decisions are another matter.

As the great physicist, Sir James Jeans, said, "We have an intuitive belief that we can choose our lunch from the menu or

abstain from housebreaking or murder; and that by our own volition we can develop our freedom to choose. We may, of course, be wrong. The old physics seemed to tell us that we were, and that our imagined freedom was all an illusion; the new physics tells us it may not be.

"It may give us room for such freedom as we have always believed we possessed; it seems possible that in it we can mould events to our desire, and live lives of emotion, intellect, and endeavour..."

So far so good. Moral and spiritual choices seem up to us. But Chief Rabbi JH Hertz offered a realistic qualification when he said, "We are free agents in so far as the choice between good and evil is concerned. This is an undeniable fact of human experience; but equally so is the fact that the sphere in which that choice is exercised is limited for us by heredity and environment".

So the question is, what influences our apparently free choices?

It is clear there are constraints. And this is how we can explain the Pharaoh story. Pharaoh's early actions towards the Israelites were free choices of evil which reflected his heredity and environment; his later actions, described by the Torah as God hardening his heart, were Pharaoh becoming so conditioned to hard-heartedness that he could no longer put up even a token show of resistance.

Our own concern, all these centuries later, must be to ensure that heredity, environment or other factors do not become so strong and powerful that we lose the last shreds of moral conscience and responsibility.

Compensation after the catastrophe – Bo

Could anything compensate the Israelites for generations of degradation and enslavement in Egypt?

We would have said no, but the Torah has a different idea: “Speak now,” it says, “in the ears of the people, and let every man ask of his neighbour and every woman ask of her neighbour, vessels of silver and vessels of gold” (Ex.11:2).

Not that this is an unexpected corollary of the departure from Egypt. God had already told Moses that the people would not leave empty-handed (Ex.3:21-22). Even Abraham knew that his descendants would leave “with great substance” (Gen.15:14).

The question is, however, did the Egyptians give the silver and gold willingly?

The Mechilta says yes; the Israelites hardly needed to say a word before the Egyptians showered them with gifts – presumably out of remorse for treating them so badly for so long. It was a sort of reparations.

But can even a large quantity of precious metal make up for years of servitude, of being denied independence, dignity and opportunities to enjoy life? And how about the lives lost – and the future generations that would never now be born?

A similar question has arisen countless times since the Holocaust. Some survivors of those terrible years indeed refused to apply for or accept monetary reparations; nothing could compensate them for what they had suffered.

But there is another view, and this is what the Mechilta is hinting at.

The oppressors cannot make good what they have ruined or destroyed, but if they recognise their sin they can at least do more than simply say so. If their repentance is genuine, they can try to articulate it in concrete terms.

Hamlet & the Prince of Denmark – B’shallach

Two different verbs in the Shirah (Song at the Sea) describe God’s liberation of the people.

In verse 13 they are *am zu ga’alta*, “the people You redeemed”; in verse 16 *am zu kanita*, “the people You acquired”.

They went through two stages. First they needed to be redeemed, their shackles broken, their bodies free. Then they needed to be uplifted and acquired by God as a people with a purpose.

This may well be the genesis of Jewish identity as a people (*ga’alta*) and a religion (*kanita*). Both words describe us; they are inseparably intertwined.

Yet there was a time – with a few anachronistic survivals – when some thought they could have religion without peoplehood. It is an impossibility, because the Bible, the prayer book and the whole of our history are full of the land of Israel and the people of Israel.

But some modern Jews make the opposite mistake, thinking Jewishness can be peoplehood without religion, Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark.

Obviously every expression of Jewish commitment is to be encouraged, but secular Jewishness lacks the higher dimension of being touched by holiness and spiritual purpose.

The argument takes on a particular form in Israel, where you hear, “I live in Israel; I don’t need synagogues”.

But how can anyone who walks the soil and breathes the air of the reborn Land not be a believer?

Or is it that some are put off religion because religious people themselves sometimes forget that love, tolerance and respect is also part of Torah?

Sins of the fathers – Yitro

The Ten Commandments. No human document is more important; none is more celebrated.

Deriving from Judaism and spread by the daughter religions, it strikes an instinctive chord in the heart and mind of every responsible person.

The style of the commandments varies. Some are long, some are short. Some are negative, some positive.

One promises a reward for obedience, the others do not. No wonder there is such a vast literature on the subject.

One of the major themes that is analysed over and over is the second commandment, which describes the Almighty as “a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those that hate Me, but showing loving kindness to the thousandth generation of those that love Me and keep My commandments.”

The critics understandably object to children suffering for their parents' sins.

That people should bear the consequences of their own deeds, that we can understand. But to suffer because of what others have done – isn't that monstrous?

The sages scrutinised every word of this commandment. They contrasted the timetable that applies to the children of the wicked (“to the third and fourth generation”) and to the righteous (“to the thousandth generation”).

Ibn Ezra said: God is patient until the fourth generation, and only then is punishment inflicted.

Tosafot HaRosh declares: Until the fourth generation punishment is not imposed; God is waiting for repentance. But if a fourth generation persists with a family tradition of wickedness, they will suffer.

Saadya states that the children, in addition to being punished for their own sins, are now punished for their ancestors' sins because they could have improved the family record but failed to do so.

The effect of righteousness, however, has a different timetable. Here, the moral foundations laid by one's ancestors work for the benefit of future generations to the end of time.

“To the thousandth generation”, whilst a most impressive statement, is not to be taken literally. The Targum understands it as “for thousands of generations”; says the Mechilta, “for innumerable generations”.

Hence, even though future generations may have their failings, the merits of their ancestors weigh with God in arousing His compassion and forgiveness.

The prophet Ezekiel seems to reject the concept of this commandment. “What do you mean,” he asks, “that you use this proverb, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge’? Use it no more! The soul that sins, it shall die... The son shall not bear the sin of the father, neither shall the father bear the sin of the son” (Ezek. 18:2-3, 20).

Yet Ezekiel is not actually in opposition to the Decalogue. His emphasis is on personal responsibility: if I sin, I will suffer; if I suffer, let it be for my own sin.

As the sages understand the Decalogue, the second commandment is saying the same thing. You do not suffer for the sins of your forebears unless you yourself are also sinful. You can overcome an encumbrance from the past by ensuring that what you yourself do is upright, just and moral.

You have to know your family history and be aware that sometimes there is baggage that you have to lift off your back and a past that needs to be overcome.

Getting to the top of the mountain – Mishpatim

Moses the mountain climber?

We know of him as a leader, a teacher, a judge – but mountain climbing is a demanding physical skill, and even at Sinai Moses was not such a young man any more. Yet the exhilaration of the moment and the support of the Almighty got him there.

Exodus 24 begins, “To Moses He said, ‘Come up to the Lord, you, and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu and seventy of the elders of Israel... but Moses alone shall come near to the Lord’” (Ex. 24:1-2). Later the chapter tells us, “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Come up to Me in the mountain, and be there...’” (Ex. 24:12).

The purpose of him “being there” was to be schooled in the details of the Oral Law, and that needed time.

Metaphorically, this verse has a message for every one of us, though none of us is Moses and none of us has his prophetic gifts or privileges.

We are all capable of spiritual ascent. Even the least emotional human being has moments of spirituality. No-one is entirely earth bound, without soul, spirit, heart or inspiration.

But there are two stages in climbing a spiritual peak. There is “come up”, and there is “be there”. And the first is sometimes harder than the second.

(In a sense there is an analogy in the famous statement of David Ben Gurion that hard as it was to create the State of Israel, it was even harder to maintain it.)

The Psalmist recognised the problem when he asked in Psalm 24, “Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord: who may stand in His holy mountain?” Note the two stages – first to ascend, then to stand.

But, you may ask, don’t human beings need to get back to ordinary daily living? Can you stay on mountain tops for ever? Are we not meant to live our lives on earth, with other people, and getting on with the day to day concerns of earthly living?

True. But some mountains are physical. Others are metaphorical. Metaphorical mountains can come with you wherever you go.

In ordinary daily living you can still stand on the mountain if your sights are raised to God and He guides and inspires your steps, if your ethical principles are of the highest and you refuse to stoop low and injure, exploit or undermine other people, if your thinking is noble and worthy and you prefer to think always of purity, beauty, truth, justice and peace, compassion, faith and hope.

Shules & rules – T’rumah

One of the first tasks of the people of Israel after the Exodus and the Revelation at Mount Sinai was to build a Tabernacle: “Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst” (Ex. 25:8).

Some of the sages thought the command to construct the sanctuary in fact came after the episode of the golden calf.

The Midrash suggests that after committing such a grievous sin the people felt ashamed and thought God would never take them back into His favour, so God told them to create a physical meeting place where they would gather and His presence would be with them.

Nachmanides, however, says the Tabernacle had nothing to do with the golden calf but enabled the people to maintain the closeness to God that had exhilarated them at Mount Sinai.

Many centuries have passed, and the first thing that Jews do in a new locale is still to establish a synagogue. They want a place of meeting, a physical focus for community and a centre for spiritual and educational inspiration.

Many of the synagogues built over the course of history were grand, impressive edifices that were triumphs of architectural design. But because of persecution and migration, many of the great synagogue buildings lost their congregations and some were physically attacked and destroyed.

So how sensible is it to put up great, solid edifices when there is no guarantee as to their future?

The obvious answer is that you must always hope for the best and have faith that the synagogue will survive and be needed.

But unfortunately those who work so hard to put up the building are sometimes such optimists that they lay down their tools and think that some magic will ensure that the synagogue is a success.

The Mi Sheberach for the congregation praises both “those who establish synagogues for prayer” and “those who enter them to pray”, and ideally the two groups should be synonymous.

Moshe Rabbenu: the leader from outside – T'tzavveh

Moses was the greatest figure in the creation of Judaism. That is why we call him Moshe Rabbenu – Moses our Teacher.

Maimonides calls him the greatest of all the prophets; the section about Moses in the Rambam's Thirteen Principles is the longest of the whole document.

Yet in the sidra which we read in the week of his birthday and his Yahrzeit, his name is omitted. Further, no-one knows his burial place, and the Pesach Haggadah does not mention him apart from an incidental quotation.

There is a similar, but even more difficult puzzle when we read the Megillah and find that here it is God Himself who does not rate a mention. (Only one other Biblical Book contains no Divine name, Shir HaShirim, though there is an oblique reference in chapter 8, verse 6.)

Many theories explain the omission of God from the Book of Esther, but perhaps the best is that the Divine Presence is evident at every turning point in the story and therefore God is there even if not by name.

Similarly with Moshe Rabbenu. He is there wherever we look in Judaism, even when not specifically named. His teaching breathes his spirit, even when not quoted b'shem om'ro. Any view of Moshe Rabbenu requires superlatives.

Ahad Ha'Am has a famous essay in which he asks: "What, essentially, was Moses?"

He proceeds to examine all the epithets that history accords him (military hero, statesman, lawgiver, etc.) finally reaching the conclusion that (as the Rambam had already insisted) Moses was a prophet.

All very impressive, but because Ahad Ha'Am lived so many decades ago he could not have shared the extra assessment of our generation – that Moshe was great because he came in from the cold as a ba'al teshuvah returning to his roots.

Lester Seligman says in an essay on Theodor Herzl: "The leadership of underprivileged groups has often been drawn from 'outsiders'. Herzl was such an outsider – an assimilated Western intellectual who returned, following the classic example of the outsider who became a leader – Moses. The fact that the leader is a stranger helps to win him acceptance. As Shmarya Levin said, had Moses risen from the ranks of the enslaved Jews to urge them to free themselves he would have been rejected."

The erstwhile outsider sees with greater perspective. He is free from the hang-ups of the insider. He is driven by a passion. He knows the ways and idiom of the rulers who will be crucial to the task. His broad experience is useful. His willingness to leave the palace to be with his people intrigues and inspired them.

All this is part of the uniqueness of Moses.

In the merit of the women – Ki Tissa

Tradition applauds the piety and good sense of the women of Moses' day.

It was because of their merit that Israel was redeemed from Egypt (Sotah 1b). Despite all the hype, they refused to join the men in making the golden calf (Midrash Tanchuma).

Their reward was that Rosh Chodesh became their special festival (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 45).

The Taz says the three pilgrimage festivals were given in honour of the three patriarchs; the 12 New Moons originally honoured the 12 tribes, but when the men made the golden calf the festival was given to the women. And when it came to building the tabernacle the women's generosity and enthusiasm were marked (Ex. 35).

History consistently recognises the piety of Jewish women. It is a pity, then, that the impression has arisen that women have no place in Jewish religiosity.

Some say that because women's spirituality is more instinctive, they need fewer rituals to express it. Nonetheless, today many observant women are seeking ways within halachah of active involvement in worship. First going to the sources to find what is possible, many are finding new fulfilment in what has issued from their search.

Some are asking about being rabbis; there are halachic limits to their becoming congregational officiants, but there are many ways to be rabbinic in the sense of scholars, teachers and arbiters of the tradition, and there may come a need to find a title through which to acknowledge their contribution.

Sorry Rabbi, but I'm bored

– Vayakhel

Congregant:

“Rabbi, I'm sorry to jump on you like this at the Kiddush, but I want you to know why I probably won't come to shule next week.

“I more or less tolerated all those chapters a few weeks ago when the narrative was about the ‘begats and begones’, the genealogies of our early ancestors. I knew the story had to get better and to move to the dramatic bits about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

“Then of course came the exciting stuff about Moses and the slaves, Moses and the plagues, Moses and the Exodus, Moses and Mount Sinai. But from there it has gone steadily downhill.

“I suppose I could handle the laws about how to run a just society, but, for Heaven's sake, all the chapters about the materials and measurements of the Tabernacle – boredom personified! – and I guess from next week there's going to be a long section about priests and sacrifices.

“How can I not be bored when there doesn't seem to be anything spiritual or meaningful in it all?”

Rabbi:

“I see your point. Obviously you don't blame me for the content of the readings. It wasn't me that wrote the Torah and it's

clearly not my fault. But give me a minute to put the other side of the argument.

“What we've got here is precisely what is needed when anyone has a project in mind. They call Israelis a start-up nation, but we Jews have been a start-up people forever.

“Any time we thought of a project we needed a vision, a plan, a survey, a set of supporters, a sound basis, materials to work with, constant checks and balances.

“Everything in life is like that – you can't just dream wildly and forget to ask yourself if it is practical and do-able.

“You want a house? You need details. You want a business? Can't be built without details. You want a marriage and family? Details. You want a better society? Details.

“That's what the Torah readings are telling us. Theory, dreams, visions, hopes... and practical implementation.

“Boring? Not to me. Every day of my life I look at what I'm doing, and I apply to it the perspective of the Torah readings about the Tabernacle.

“So, please look at the sidra in this light, next week's sidra too, and let's see you in shule!”

Chazak chazak – P'kudei

This sidra brings the book of Sh'mot to an end, and it is customary for the congregation to stand for the final verse and to proclaim chazak, chazak v'nit'chazek – “Be strong, be strong and let us strengthen each other”.

Though a long entrenched feature of Jewish life, the custom is probably medieval in origin.

An early reference in the Sefer Hamanhig of Avraham Hayarchi of Lunel (12th century) traces its origin to the verse, “Only be strong, and let not this book of the law depart from your mouth” (Joshua 1:7-8).

Exclaiming chazak chazak encourages us all to embark on the next book of the Chumash and to be faithful to the age-old cycle of commitment to the reading, study and observance of the Torah.

History has proved that the more strength a Jew has given to the Torah, the more strength the Torah has given the Jew.

Jews often had to leave material possessions behind, but they would never abandon their Torahs. Nor would they let themselves weaken in their devotion to Torah study.

However bitter life was in the concentration camps, Talmud study was taken seriously, often without books.

In some places there were veritable universities, for example in Theresienstadt, where Leo Baeck was such an inspiration. Even in Australia, in the internment camps, study circles were held on a regular basis.

As the Talmud itself put it, just as a fish is lost without water, so is a Jew lost without Torah.

History by design – Vayikra

With one Hebrew letter Moses showed his humility.

God told him to commence the third book of the Torah with the word Vayikra – “And He called”. Moses wrote the last letter of the word, an alef, smaller than the normal size.

The explanation, according to the Baal HaTurim, is that Moses wanted to leave the alef out altogether so that the word would mean, “And He happened” -- God just happened to call him, but He could have appointed anyone else -- but God insisted, “No; I deliberately decided upon you, and it wasn’t by chance!”

The issue with Moses was, was his appointment mere chance or a Divine call? It is part of a wider question, is history the result of blind fate or Divine design?

Reflecting on modern history, Nahum Goldmann said that we seem to stumble from crisis to crisis; nothing seems planned either by God or man.

Judaism makes allowances for Moses and his modesty but is adamant that things do not merely happen. God is in charge and there is, as a philosopher of history once put it, “a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined plan”.

Not that we can always immediately read the Divine mind, but when we reflect back we see that our history has never been haywire.

The role appointed for the Jewish people sometimes appears to be sidelined, but in the end our survival, persistence, determination and faith endure.

But does the Holocaust not gravely undermine this theory?

Some, rather too comfortably, say that the catastrophe was because sections of European Jews (the German Jews? the Zionists? the anti-Zionists? who knows?) thwarted God’s will and had to be punished.

Eliezer Berkovits, the theologian, calls such arguments obscene, and he is right. No-one is entitled to impute guilt to the martyrs or whitewash the perpetrators. The fact is that the Holocaust is too vast, too frightening, too searing a tragedy to permit easy explanation.

But there is another fact. The losses were unspeakable, but the Jewish people survived. Judaism survived. Israel came into being. And all are flourishing.

This cannot be chance. It has to be design. We have to “weep sore in the night” for our suffering, but we must also celebrate our survival.

Keep the fires burning – Tzav

It was hard work to be a kohen. The detail the kohanim had to master was stupendous. The responsibility of carrying out their duties properly was awesome.

Maybe that is why the priestly office was hereditary, because otherwise hardly anyone might volunteer for it.

The onus on the kohanim was not only mechanical, limited to performing routine functions. It was also spiritual.

The point is made by a Chassidic comment on a verse in the sidra, v’esh hamizbe’ach tukkad bo -- “the fire of the altar shall be kept burning on it” (Lev. 6:2).

The commentator says that in Hebrew grammar bo can mean “on it”; it can also mean “in him”, in the kohen. Kohanim had be fired with enthusiasm for their task and never treat it in perfunctory fashion.

Teaching sermon technique to rabbinical students, the late Rabbi SM Lehrman used to say, “If you can’t put fire in your sermon, put your sermon in the fire.”

Every religious role requires hitlahavut, burning fervour. Rabbi and chazan must be aflame with love of God, love of Torah, love of human beings.

It cannot be approached with the proverbial public service mentality. You never clock on or clock off. It occupies all your waking hours, and the night too (your dreams and nightmares both generally have a synagogal focus). You have to believe in what you are doing.

It becomes hard when the community does not always share your passion for God and Judaism, when you are trying to arouse them to great thoughts and noble ideals and they doggedly insist on being hard-headed and unimaginative. The result is that some rabbis and chazanim burn out and some drop out.

But most echo the words of Moses to the Levites when he inducted them into sanctuary service, Ashreichem shez’chitem lih’yot shammashim laMakom -- “Fortunate are you to have the privilege of being ministers to the Almighty”.

Tarred with a brush of guilt

– Sh'mini

1945 is more than 70 years ago.

In a fast moving century the events of the Holocaust are history. That is, to everyone else. To Jews, they happened yesterday.

The pain is still searing and sharp. In some ways it is even getting worse.

For the world seems to have learned very little from our experience -- indeed from the experience of mankind as a whole; Martin Buber said that with the Sho'ah the entire "order of being" went awry.

Whom shall we blame for the tragedy?

There are questions we address to God. There are also questions for human beings. One of these questions is suggested by a Talmudic comment on the Torah reading of Sh'mini.

The sidra tells of a plunge from triumph to tragedy. Aaron has just been inducted into office. Two of his sons, Nadav and Avihu, step forward and bring "strange fire" onto the altar. They are summarily struck dead.

But, say the sages, Aaron had other sons. Were their hands any cleaner? Maybe not.

The Talmud says: "Happy are the righteous! Not only do they acquire merit, but they bestow merit upon their children and children's children to the end of all generations. For Aaron had several sons who deserved to be burnt like Nadav and Avihu, as it is said, 'They that were left (to survive)' (Lev. 10:12), but the merit of their father helped.

"Woe unto the wicked! Not alone do they render themselves guilty, but they bestow guilt upon their children and children's children unto the end of all generations." (Yoma 87a)

The Holocaust was a plunge from triumph to tragedy, from sophisticated civilisation to primitive savagery. Did the brothers and sisters of the perpetrators share in the guilt?

Let us take another analogy, from ancient Egypt. Did the ordinary Egyptians support Pharaoh's enslavement of the Israelites?

Since it was not a democracy they were not consulted. They had to go along with the policies of their king. Any sense of outrage or compassion was overcome by the euphemisms in which royal policies were clothed. As Nachmanides says, all was "done cleverly so that the crime should not be known".

Move to the 20th century. The Nazis also clothed their plans in euphemisms -- "special treatment", "resettlement", "solution of the Jewish question". They were masters of manipulation by words. The difference was that Germany was ostensibly a democracy, as were so many other countries.

In theory you could protest if you saw what was happening and still had a conscience. But protest was limited. Out of fear? Out of the prejudice that lay beneath the civilised surface?

The brothers and sisters of the perpetrators cannot escape a share in the guilt. Unlike the brothers of Nadav and Avihu, their moral patrimony was not strong enough to excuse them.

This does not imply that every German deserves punishment, but every German bears part of the guilt. They can only rise above it by constantly insisting upon democracy, decency and human dignity on every level.

The problem however is not limited to the German nation. Other nations were the brothers and sisters of the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

Is their moral patrimony as powerful as that of Nadav and Avihu's brothers?

Not if they go along with suppression of a religion here or an ethnic group there, and are taken in by verbal contortions like "ethnic cleansing".

The only kosher ethnic cleansing is when an ethnic group is ashamed of itself and atones for its acts and attitudes.

Until then, it seems that nothing has been learned from the Holocaust. And there are nations all over the world that still share in the guilt.

Euthanasia & the sanctity of life – Tazria

This week's sidra focuses on medical issues.

The Torah is co-extensive with life.
Nothing human is outside its concern.

This has been the case not only in ancient times, but throughout history.

Human life and health are major priorities for Judaism. Since life is given by God, its preservation is a religious and moral duty. What I do with my body and my life is not just my problem, but God's.

This is why we cannot unquestioningly accept the view of Justice Cardozo that "every human being of adult years and sound mind has a right to determine what shall be done with his own body."

It sounds fine, but it fails to recognise that our bodies are not our own. I may place my material possessions at risk, but not my body or my life. Hence the cry for euthanasia – "assisted suicide" – can have no echo in Judaism.

Obviously Judaism fully recognises the problems of the dying patient and the agonies of the family. But it has always set its face against compromising anyone's right to live, even that of the patient whose condition arouses in himself or others the feeling that there are times when life no longer has meaning.

Life is a precious boon given by God. Only He has the prerogative of ending it. The body is His property; only He may determine its destiny. One may not commit murder, nor shorten anyone's life, even by a moment.

The rule is, "A gosses (a dying person) is a living person in every respect... One may not close the eyes of a dying person. He who touches them or moves them is a shedder of blood, for Rabbi Meir used to say: This may be compared to a flickering flame. As soon as a person touches it, it becomes extinguished. So, too, whoever closes the eyes of a dying person is deemed to have taken his life."

An argument put forward by the proponents of euthanasia is that there can come a time when one's life is not really life and a person is no longer really a person.

Helga Kuhse, in "The Sanctity-of-Life Doctrine in Medicine: A Critique", quotes Dr Michael Tooley, who suggests that "we reserve the term 'person' for those beings who are capable of understanding that they are continuing selves".

Kuhse's conclusion is that neither human fetuses nor human infants, nor humans with severe mental retardation or brain damage are "persons", and it would not be directly wrongful to take their lives.

She advocates that competent patients should have the right to choose death and incompetent patients (where their express wishes are not known) should be dealt with in a way that considers the patient's wellbeing and the prevention of pointless suffering.

This sort of thinking has no place in Judaism, which insists that the right to life is absolute, not relative. To borrow a phrase used by the Talmud, who has the right to determine that one person's blood is redder than another's?

It is the most dangerous moral judgement of all to make distinctions between the relative value of people's lives – the sick as against the healthy, the almost dead as against the fully living, the old as against

the young and, as the moral slide gains momentum, the poor as against the rich, the coloured as against the white, the Jew as against the gentile...

From the Jewish point of view, then, active euthanasia is totally forbidden. Is there, however, any room for passive euthanasia, withholding treatment which may be artificially delaying a person's demise?

Moshe Isserles says in his glosses to the Shulchan Aruch: "If there is something which inhibits the soul's departure, such as nearby noise of knocking like wood-chopping, or if there is salt on the patient's tongue and these hinder the soul's departure, then it is permitted to remove them from there because this does not entail a (positive) act but only the removal of an impediment to death."

The question is, are we shortening a patient's life, which is forbidden, or shortening their dying, which can be permitted.

Judgements on a cloudy day

– M'tzora

Blots and blemishes occupy most of this week's sidra. But there is a stern rabbinic warning, "One does not examine blemishes on a cloudy day" (Mishnah Nega'im 2:2).

The warning is meant to be taken literally, but it also has a metaphorical meaning. For this is exactly what we tend to do. It's at moments when we are not seeing clearly that we generally pass judgment on others, and even on ourselves.

Rabbis are not immune from this tendency. A rabbi is tempted, when he sees people transgressing the Torah or deliberately misunderstanding it, to want to give up on his community.

That the people are being unfair to the Torah and to their own Jewish identity, that's undeniable. But this may not be the moment to form a firm conclusion. When the rabbi has regained his equanimity, and his sense of humour, he is likely to feel less angry and to say, as he probably has so often in the past, "I can see there is still work for me to do in bringing Torah to my community".

The sages often speak of the tinnok shenishbah – "the child that was captured". In some ways it is analogous to the Australian debate about the "Stolen Generations" – Aboriginals taken from their parents to be reared without their ancestral culture. In recent Jewish history there were "stolen" children who, left with non-Jews for protection during the Holocaust, were not always returned afterwards.

In a different sense we have often suffered from external forces, ideas and philosophies which prevented us from understanding and experiencing the true riches of Judaism from within. That is what prevents many a Jew from thinking in an authentically Jewish way.

That's why the rabbi must not let the cloudy day get the better of him but wait a little until he can say once more, "There's still work for me to do".

Conventional morality

– Acharei Mot

On Yom Kippur we read a section from Acharei Mot, warning us to ensure that our intimate relationships follow the laws of the Torah, not the ways of ancient nations that lacked a strict code of morality.

The warning commences, "I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 18:2). This is more than merely a general introduction to the laws that now follow.

Rashi quotes Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, who says in the Sifra that God foresaw that in time to come Israel would become lax in its adherence to these laws, so He told them that as both "The Lord" (HaShem) and "God" (Elokim), He would watch and respond to their conduct.

As HaShem, exercising His attribute of mercy, He would reward them for obedience; as Elokim, exercising the attribute of justice, He would punish them for any transgression.

Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi is said to have been referring to the period of Ezra, when, according to the prophet Malachi (2:13), men "acted treacherously" against their wives (Sifra). Ezra therefore needed to re-establish the integrity of Jewish marriage (Ezra 10).

Our own age seems to echo the problem. It is an era of so-called "political correctness", when anyone who stands up for conventional morality can be and often is subject to criticism and condemnation and accused of holding medieval attitudes.

Of course Torah morality is even older than the medieval era, and there is no evidence that going away from Torah principles of morality has made the world a better, safer or happier place to live in.

Ban the sermon! – K'doshim

“Do not hate your brother in your heart,” says the Torah; “rebuke your fellow and do not bear sin because of him” (Lev. 19:17).

If you see someone is wrong, you should not let your disapproval become an obsessive hate. Rebuke them if necessary and save them from Divine punishment or, according to another view, save yourself from a share in their sin by appearing to acquiesce in what they are doing.

Some make criticising others an art form. They are so good at telling others off that they think they are God’s policemen.

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said, “I wonder if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to reprove” (Arachin 16b). To utter reproof you must speak out of love, not hatred. You must be fair and constructive, and not so negative as to lose all credibility; and you must be without sins of your own.

Rabbi Tarfon says that if you tell someone, “Remove the mote from between your eyes,” he might retort, “Remove the beam from between your eyes!”

These principles apply to rabbis too. Simeon Singer, a great Anglo-Jewish minister of an earlier generation, said that rabbis should avoid hellfire and brimstone sermons; he pointed out that the curses of the Tochechah are read only twice a year, and one of those times is in the English summer when people are away on holiday anyhow.

Some Chassidic teachers opposed all sermons; they said that whilst rabbis were permitted to teach, they should not admonish.

They added that if a rabbi teaches well and his congregation take note, no rebuke will be necessary.

They want a Bat-Mitzvah – Emor

This Shabbat, when we read the detailed rules that shape the high days and holy days of the year, it is relevant to quote a former rabbinical colleague of mine who used to muse aloud, “The Jews want to be gentiles and the gentiles want to be Jews!”.

I am sure that what he meant was that while there were Jews who wanted to discard the practices of Judaism, at the same time there were non-Jews who sought to take them on.

It certainly is evident that some Jews would prefer to put their Jewish identity behind them, not that that is easy – and some non-Jews either want to enter the Jewish fold or at least introduce Jewish ideas and ceremonies into their lives.

An example is the many non-Jews who are fascinated by the Pesach Seder, by Chanukah observances, by Rosh HaShanah or by countless other practices, and try to experience them for themselves.

Another example is the non-Jewish girls who say they would like to have a Bat-Mitzvah and the boys who want a Bar-Mitzvah.

Clearly, people need rituals and ceremonies, especially to mark life-cycle events. This is something Jews are particularly good at. We are also particularly good at uniting home and synagogue and ensuring that Jewish life is not limited to the house of worship but encompasses the home and the family.

No wonder the Midrash talks of someone who wandered all over the world to find treasure and finally discovered that there was treasure in his own garden.

God on the mountain tops – B'har

A sidra that is called B'har – “On the Mountain” – will inevitably be interpreted symbolically as well as literally.

Mountains play an important part in Biblical and Jewish history. The binding of Isaac took place on a mountain. The giving of the Torah was on a mountain. Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal on a mountain.

Mountains also evoke spirituality. The Psalmist says, “I lift up my eyes to the mountains: from whence comes my help?” It is not that the mountain itself is a source of help, but, as Samson Raphael Hirsch puts it, “There is One Who is higher still and surer” (Commentary on Psalm 121:1-2).

The Talmud tells us that Abraham found God on a mountain, Isaac found Him in a field and Jacob found Him in a house (Pes. 84a).

The references to Isaac and Jacob require a commentary to themselves, but the assertion about Abraham is a remarkable contribution to our understanding of spirituality and holiness. For the mountains are in a way the meeting place of God and man.

The 19th chapter of Exodus, the prologue to the giving of the Torah, speaks of God coming down onto Mount Sinai and Moses ascending. The mountain was the setting for their encounter, as Mount Moriah was the setting for the meeting of God and Abraham.

To understand the spiritual significance of the mountains one must know that for Judaism the way to God is not through

theological assertions or philosophical propositions. One cannot truly encounter the Divine by merely mouthing a creed or restating the cosmological, teleological, ontological or any other supposed philosophical “proof”.

The way of Judaism is not to work through what Leo Baeck called “finished statements”; the only finished statement in Judaism is “Hear, O Israel, HaShem is our God, HaShem is one”, and “one” is not simply a number but an acknowledgement that God is unique and cannot be delimited or defined.

So where do we find God?

In the certainty that we are in His presence. And that is where the mountains help. For there is a majesty and mystique about mountains. It cannot and need not be put into words, but it is there nonetheless.

Rudolf Otto, author of “The Idea of the Holy”, sensed a holiness in a simple North African synagogue which he described as “numinous”. The numinous, however, cannot easily be put into words, just as one cannot easily articulate the appeal of a work of art or music.

Berthold Auerbach said of music that it was “a universal language, and need not be translated. With it soul speaks to soul” (“Auf der Hohe,” 1865). Religion too is “a universal language, and need not be translated”.

A personality clone – B'chukkotai

Now that cloning has moved from science fiction into the realm of practicality we have major ethical issues to address, especially with the cloning of human beings.

Does cloning usurp the Divine prerogatives? Probably no, since cloning is not playing God but using God-given material, even though not through “normal” methods of procreation.

What is the identity of the clone? Who is the father? Who is the mother? From the Jewish point of view, what is the status of the clone if a female clonor or gestational mother is non-Jewish?

Will people put in their orders – blue-eyed, not brown-eyed children; girls, not boys; athletes, not academics? Will we end up, as Robert Silverberg puts it, with “a legion of parentless, quasisynthetic beings trained to serve the purposes of the state or its master”?

The cloning question is pertinent to this week's sidra, which deals with evaluating persons. As a mark of devotion to God, you could set a valuation upon yourself or any of your family, and donate the money to the sanctuary (Lev. 27). But how can you set a monetary value on a person?

You can assess the value of their house, their car, their business. You can find what they have in the bank. Presumably this is how the “rich list” decides how much someone is worth.

But real worth transcends the financial. Indeed the person who is really worth the most may in monetary terms have the least. Real worth depends on character, personality

and, above all, uniqueness: for every human being is and has a spark of the Divine.

In particular, none has a duplicate, a carbon copy, a clone. All have their own talent and capacity, their own distillation of life's experience, their own emotional and intellectual depth, their own soul, spirit and person-ness. Every individual is a world of their own.

No wonder that when one sees a person who looks different, one has to bless God m'shanneh hab'riyyot – “He who varies His creatures”.

All this may have its implications for the ethicists who address the moral dimensions of cloning human beings. But in its own way it has a message for each of us, facing ordinary life in the uncloned here and now.

The manner in which we deal with other people inevitably raises the question of whether we adequately acknowledge their person-ness and uniqueness.

In so many situations we depersonalise people. Someone enters hospital: they become a patient. They board an aircraft: they become a passenger. They come into a shop: they are a customer. Everyone is and wants to be a somebody: in many situations we make them into a nobody.

Rule number one of being a human being is that each of us is a person.

Take this away and it is almost as if you have committed murder; you have diminished man made in the image of God.

The wanderer's return

– B'midbar

Though known in English as Numbers, the book of the Chumash we begin this week is B'midbar, "In the Wilderness".

This name encapsulates a whole dimension of human experience.

For people can spend whole segments of their lives, and even their whole life, in a metaphorical wilderness: you can be in the wilderness professionally, when, despite all your talents, you never quite make a success of your career.

In quite a different sense the wilderness can be seen in some people's Jewish lives. There is residual Jewishness there, but they never get to the exciting, satisfying kernel of Jewish meaning and experience.

Some are in the wilderness in an ideological sense.

Franz Rosenzweig reminded us that in olden days, if a Jew left the ghetto walls during the day to ply a trade, he had to return to the ghetto at dusk. Rosenzweig compared this to the Jewish intellectual whose focus is outside Judaism and sometimes, not even at the twilight of life, never returns "home".

Does that mean that the two are mutually exclusive – Judaism and the other intellectual options?

Not at all; Rozenzweig's point is that whatever your angle on life, it and Judaism would both be enriched if they had dialogue.

Judaism has something to give the lawyer, the doctor, the musician, the artist, the linguist – and they have something to bring to Judaism.

What Judaism has to bring is its insights and ideas, and especially its ethics. What the intellectual wanderers can bring is the infinite variety of expressions of the human mind, heart and spirit.

Think of the various associations of Jewish lawyers and jurists. They are not mere professional clubs. They have an intellectual dimension: their meetings and publications examine the interface between Jewish and general law.

There are similar associations of Jewish doctors, for whom medical ethics are a major subject of study.

In some places there are guilds of Jewish journalists: heaven knows the media can learn from the Jewish communications ethic.

A great desideratum would be a Jewish business executives' association: not that Jews in business are any less ethical than others, but they need to know the Jewish ethic of business, follow it even when inconvenient or inexpedient, and be a model to others.

The Levites as Chazanim

– Naso

22,000 Levites are enumerated in the sidra.

They were the smallest of the tribes of Israel, smaller even than M'nasheh, which had 32,000 members.

Today, of course, when numbers matter, we might be tempted to say that small groups do not really count. The rabbis said, however, that though the Levites were the smallest in number they were closest to the glory of God (Midrash Tanchuma).

Why did they merit this distinction?

There are many possible answers. One with special appeal is that the Levites were the singers. It is they who made up the sanctuary choir.

Theirs was the privilege of putting words into song. Their song took wings and reached the heavenly throne, there to join the angelic choir with its kadosh, kadosh, kadosh.

Their example is the model which has always been the inspiration of cantors and synagogue choirs.

Not that cantors always reached the ideal, and many were criticised for placing showmanship before devotion. Nor did choristers always understand that their task was not to perform but to give a lead and shape to congregational song.

But at times it was said that the best of cantors reached greater spiritual heights with his singing that did rabbis with their exegesis and expositions.

This is not an argument against rabbis, but an expression of the significance of song in the synagogue and in Jewish life.

The best days of our lives

– B'ha'alot'cha

Ask many people to nominate the best days of their lives, and they will pinpoint an episode or period in their past.

The Israelites were like that in the wilderness. All they could do was look backward: “We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for naught (i.e. cheaply), the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic” (Num.11:5).

Distance made the heart grow fonder. They saw even Egypt through rose-coloured spectacles. Compared to the past, the present was unimpressive.

There is a value in nostalgia. But life cannot be lived backward. Only in your fantasies can you be back again re-living your childhood or any other stage of your life history.

And this explains something I said to the children who were interviewing me for a “living historian” project. They wanted to know which was the most important day in my life, and I said, “Today... and tomorrow”.

Today, because every today is a new, exciting opportunity. Tomorrow, because if I handle today wisely I can help to shape the future.

I am sometimes jealous of my children and grandchildren, because the likelihood is that they will see wonderful developments in the future which I may not see.

But I know that what I do today and tomorrow will lay the foundations for what they are, experience and achieve.

You want to look back? Good luck to you.

Maybe the fish really was tastier then, and the cucumbers were better, and the melons, leeks, onions and garlic too.

But as Solomon Schechter said, you cannot feel with your grandfather's heart. You can think of the past, but you have to live your life forward.

The best days of your life? The poet was right: the best is yet to be.

False reports – Sh'lach L'cha

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

That's a rough translation of an old French saying. Nowhere does it sound more up to date than when we consider the way things are reported.

In the time of Moses, it was the ten spies who gave the truth an untoward slant. In our day, it is the media. Not just in connection with the Middle East, but on everything. Whatever the media are covering, if it is a subject on which any of us is an expert, we see how wrong the reports are.

Result? Everything seems to be misrepresented. We feel we can't trust the media about anything.

Is editorial bias the reason, or commercial interest... or both together?

The answer may be yes, and in that case there ought to be a journalistic principle that the news must be as close to the truth as possible. Not simply because otherwise they may lose readers, viewers or listeners, but because they have an ethical duty.

If the problem is that media personnel generally work at such a pace that they haven't the time and leisure to check every fact and examine every nuance, there is something wrong with media procedures.

No-one is expected to be an expert on everything, but in the same way in which there are staff proof-readers who check for technical accuracy in spelling, grammar and linguistic usage, so there should be staff researchers who have reliable resources at their fingertips.

Meritocracy – Korach

Rashi asks, “Why was Korach in conflict with Moses? He was jealous of the status of Elitzafan ben Uzziel”.

Elitzafan had been appointed prince over the tribe of K’hat, and Korach resented it, even though the appointment had been made by the express command of God (Num. 3:30).

Korach argued, “My father and his brothers were four in number” (Amram, Yitzhar, Hevron and Uzziel: Ex. 6:18); “Amram’s two sons, Moses and Aaron, have high rank. Who should come next in status? I, the son of Yitzhar, the second brother. Yet he has appointed the son of the youngest brother!”

If all that counted was who your father was, Korach would have had a case, but a meritocracy does not necessarily work that way.

There are other cases in the Bible in which a younger son receives preferment over an older one, and since God made the decisions it is clear that the Divine policy is that a job should go to the person who is best qualified. This is very hard on the person who has been passed over.

The ideal way of handling one’s disappointment is suggested by the story of Alexander the Great.

When raised to high rank, Alexander was young and felt that every possible battle had already been fought and won by others. What was left for him to do? His answer was, “There must still be victories for me to win!”

So it is with someone who does not achieve the position he or she dreamt of. There are still victories they can win.

Everyone can find an arena that can draw out their talents and enable them to record their own victories.



You must be reasonable

– Chukkat

The strangest paradox in the Torah is the parah adumah, the law of the red heifer (Num. 19).

When a person was ritually impure, a mixture of substances was sprinkled upon him, with the effect that the impure became pure whilst the pure (the officiating kohen) became impure. One and the same substance thus had two opposite effects.

The Torah simply calls this a “statute” – a law obeyed out of loyalty to God though its motive remains a mystery. It implies that religion does not need to be amenable to reason and logic.

There is something attractive about such faith. It reduces doubts. It provides emotional security.

Some Jews share this approach, but Judaism as a whole rejects it. It is more normative in Judaism to say God gave you the gift of reason and expects it to be used. Reasoning may not bring final answers, but you are not absolved from asking questions and grappling with them.

Judaism agrees with the saying, “He who will not reason is a bigot; he that cannot reason is a fool; he that dare not reason is a slave.”

The classical philosophers used to say, “God forbid there should be anything in the Torah which goes against logic.”

They would largely endorse the words of AN Whitehead: “Religious truth must

be developed from knowledge acquired when our ordinary sense and intellectual operations are at their highest level of discipline. To move from this position towards the dark recesses of abnormal psychology is to surrender finally any hope of a solid foundation for religious doctrine.”

Does this mean nothing is true or to be accepted unless we have arrived at it by the use of the human mind?

That would negate the need and validity of Divine revelation. It would say, “God, I am not interested in Your word, only in what reason says is true!”

But that is to go much too far. Judaism believes the primary way to truth is through what God lovingly reveals to us. What our reason does is to enable us to reinforce our perception of the message and to try in humility to understand God’s thinking.

There will be times, as with the red heifer, when our thinking brings us to a dead end, when reason does not produce results. That is when we recognise the limitations inherent in being mortal.

There will be things and their connections which we will never be able to grasp. But instead of saying, “I believe because it is absurd”, we say, “I believe the Divine wisdom is infinitely superior to mine. I believe God expects me to apply my reason even to difficult things. But I know the limitations to my wisdom.”

What God requires – Balak

If religion, every religion, has a message, a meaning, it comes in its capacity to respond to the existential situation.

When there is a crisis, religion is asked, “What shall we do?” and for most challenges the answer comes in the words of today’s haftarah (Micah 6:8):

It has been told you, O man, what is good, And what the Lord requires of you: To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

Justice, mercy, humility – each speaks to a world afflicted by tragedy and crisis.

Justice. We ask, is it fair or just, that people should suffer? It’s the oldest and deepest philosophical question. But today’s challenge is not so much philosophical as moral and human.

Justice insists that we are fair to ourselves and do not wittingly place our lives at risk. Justice insists that we are fair to others and do not even unwittingly expose them to danger. Justice insists that if someone is suffering, we move heaven and earth to help them.

Mercy, compassion, fellow-feeling – that’s the second word of the prophet. Its message is that whoever is suffering, their suffering is not merely physical. The pain in the body may not be as great as the pain

in the heart. “Because I am suffering, does that mean you don’t, won’t, or can’t any longer love me?” is the question.

The story is told of two friends who professed love and brotherhood, one to the other.

Said the one: “Do you love me?” “Of course I do”, came the answer. “Then where do I hurt?” “How do I know where you hurt?” “You don’t know where I hurt? If you truly loved me, you’d feel my pain”... That’s what mercy is.

And **humility**? Humility is not preaching at people from a high pulpit, but being with people where they are.

Humility is asking whether there was anything which we, our society, our science or our government might have done to make things better for others, when we were all too busy seeking status or self-satisfaction.

Humility is never losing faith in God, in other people, in oneself. Humility is being able to pray, and through prayer to have more hope.

There is a saying, “Leave a little to God”. To leave everything to God is to abdicate responsibility. To leave nothing to God is to be cosmically conceited and unable to see your limitations. Humility says, do all you can and don’t be wanting in your efforts – but have faith that there is a God who will do His part too.

Does God get angry? – Pinchas

Does God get angry? He seems to, all through the T'nach. This week's portion is an example.

It begins with the statement that Pinchas ben Elazar ben Aharon the priest turned away the Divine anger from the people of Israel (Num. 25:10). And anger is not the only emotion which the Bible attributes to the Him. There are positive emotions like love and joy, and negative emotions like jealousy and hatred.

That they combine to give us a picture of a God who feels, is perfectly obvious. Yet they create a series of theological problems. One is the implication that God is not constant or consistent, that He can move from one passion to another.

A more serious problem is whether emotions are possible at all with a God who has no shape or form, who is not and cannot be affected by physical, psychological or other events like His human creatures can and do.

Something hurts me as a human: I react with pain or even stoicism. Something gives me pleasure: I respond with a smile. This is the nature of earthly, human life.

It makes perfect sense. This is the way we are made. However, God is above and beyond such events.

Even if you remove the physical metaphors from the Biblical references such as His nostrils quivering and His heart rejoicing, you still have a problem.

The approach of the sages was to say, Dibb'rah Torah kil'shon b'nei adam, "The Torah speaks in the language of human beings" (B'rachot 31b etc.). When we want to use language to speak of God, our only language is human. Rationally we know that our language is too limited to apply to God who cannot be confined within sentences or defined within linguistic boundaries. All we can do is as the rabbis did, to say, kiv'yachol – "as it were".

God does not have human emotions, but what else can we do when we speak about Him? We are speaking in metaphors, in poetry, not in factual statements. If we had to restrict ourselves to factual statements we would be unable to say anything.

When a diplomat says yes – Mattot

Diplomacy is a very important thing. Being diplomatic in your dealings with other people helps to ensure there will be peace in society.

Diplomacy as a profession is also an important part of international relations. Indeed when I was very young I thought I might like to be a diplomat myself. I might even have been good at it. What changed my mind was that being a teacher of Torah came to seem a more satisfying challenge.

I have since come to know quite a number of diplomats. Most of them I found very stimulating people who served their country well. And on their behalf I have often been affronted by an old saying about diplomats: "When a diplomat says 'yes', it means 'maybe'; when he says 'maybe', it means 'no'; when he says 'no', he is no diplomat".

Why am I affronted? Because the language of negotiation seems to require a certain amount of fluidity. Diplomatic ambiguity has its place, but it has its limits. And in ordinary day to day speech the better rule has to be, as the sages put it, "Your 'yes' should be 'yes'; your 'no' should be no".

The Torah emphasises this lesson when it says in today's sidra, "If a person makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath imposing an obligation upon himself, he shall not desecrate his word. He must carry out all that crosses his lips" (Num. 30:3).

Notice what the verse says. Not merely "he shall not break his word", but "he shall not desecrate his word". Words, especially promises, are holy. If you do not mean to live by them, you should keep quiet and say nothing.

How often do people fall out because someone made a promise and then forgot all about it, or did not really mean it seriously? How often do people say "yes", when they mean "maybe" or even "no", and then wonder why others do not trust them any more?

The verse, of course, speaks of promises to God. In a sense that's an even bigger problem. You might think twice about promises to other people because you know there may be a comeback if you fail to perform. But God? So often we exploit His divine good nature. We say, "God will understand". (As Voltaire put it, "God will forgive. That's His job!") Question: why should God understand, in the sense of writing off anything we promise Him as automatically worthless?

That's why it was clever of Judaism to invent Kol Nidrei, which asks Divine forbearance just in case we are carried away with emotion and promise more than we should. But we shouldn't exploit Kol Nidrei either. Before making promises we should think, and think again. Promises should not become a joke.

Politics & the art of leadership – D'varim

Journeying as a Jew – Mass'ei

Four decades of journeys and resting-places brought the Israelites to the Promised Land.

Samson Raphael Hirsch remarks that not only did each journey bring them physically from one place to another, but as Jews it also led them to a higher spiritual level. They progressed not only to a destination but also to a destiny.

Though the story is ancient, its implications are timeless. Movement from place to place has always been part of Jewish and human experience. People migrate (sometimes to escape persecution), they travel for business, they pursue educational opportunities elsewhere, they go on holiday. But the question today is whether a Jew on the move is moving as a Jew.

King Solomon says, “In all your ways know Him” (Prov. 3:6). This means never being a Jonah, who thinks you can take a holiday from God.

It means not leaving your Siddur behind at home, or, if you are a male, your tallit and tefillin. It means saying Tefillat HaDerech before you set out, and HaGomel when you arrive.

It means remembering the Sabbath day to keep it holy, and not davka setting out on your journey on Shabbat. It also means eating as a Jew wherever you are, and not saying kashrut is all too difficult.

It means finding a shule, en route or at your destination – not just to check out the architecture but to daven too, and to meet the local community.

To move as a Jew also implies not lowering your Jewish moral and ethical standards wherever you are or whatever the temptation.

Policy speeches are part of politics. “Elect me and I will do this for you, and this, and this, and this...” – that’s what they all say in the lead-up to an election, and the media hype builds up the excitement, and we think that at last someone is going to tackle the really big and important issues

But, as they used to say in London, “After the Lord Mayor’s Show comes the dustman”. Once the election is over the politicians (some of them at least) are stricken with the disease called selective amnesia, and the promises (some of them at least) end up in the dustbin.

Now no-one is going to argue against election manifestos and policy speeches. You need to know what a candidate for office thinks the country needs and believes him- or herself capable of achieving, even if you know from past experience not to expect it all to happen. But there is an important element that tends not to get mentioned at all. That is the candidate’s own character and reliability.

Yes, King Solomon says, “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth” (Prov.

27:2), and if you are a person of integrity it is better that this be confirmed by others and not by your own mouth. But whoever says it, it is important that the public know what sort of person a leader really is.

Which is where we find a remarkable definition in the Torah. Moses says, “Get you, from each of your tribes, wise, discerning, knowledgeable men, and I will make them heads over you” (Deut. 1:13). His father-in-law Jethro had long before said a similar thing: “You shall provide out of the people able men, who fear God; men of truth, hating unjust gain” (Ex. 18:21).

Seven criteria altogether – in the order in which they come in the text, ability, piety, truth, honesty, wisdom, discernment and knowledge.

Unrealistic? A mere dream? To some extent yes. The sages say that Moses himself found it difficult to identify enough potential leaders who possessed all seven qualifications, which is why he says, “I took the heads of your tribes, wise, knowledgeable men...” (Deut. 1:15).

But though neither Moses or any other generation may find it easy to identify ideal leaders, we have to keep looking and to be as insistent, demanding and optimistic as possible.

Jewish identity – Va'et'channan

Basic to Judaism is the duty to honour one's parents: as set out in the Deuteronomy version of the Decalogue, "Honour your father and mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, that you may live long and it may be well with you in the land which the Lord your God gives you" (Deut. 5:16).

From parents we gain innumerable privileges – life, nurturing, continuity, identity. Who we are depends on the heredity and the environment they give us.

Who we are as Jews also depends on them. Both parents are part of our Jewish identity. But each makes a specific contribution. The mother determines whether we are Jewish (unless of course one is a convert to Judaism); the father determines our Jewish category – Kohen, Levi or Yisrael.

The matrilineal principle – Jewishness deriving from the mother – has been the rule throughout history. This was impressively borne out 40 years ago when David Ben Gurion wrote to Jewish scholars in many countries asking for their definition of a Jew. Most of the replies said that "only one who is born to a Jewish mother or who is converted to Judaism according to Halachah" could be regarded as a Jew (Hoenig, "Jewish Identity", Feldheim).

Some ask why the principle is matrilineal and not patrilineal. The source is Deut. 7:3-4, which refers to "your son" as the child of an Israelite mother, implying that the child is not "your son" in a religious sense if his mother is non-Jewish.

This conclusion, found in the Talmud (Kiddushin 65b, 68b), is cited by all the halachic authorities including Maimonides and the Shulchan Aruch. There are no dissenting opinions, either in the Talmud or from later rabbis. This has been the unbroken rule throughout history.

Rabbi (Lord) Jakobovits offers four reasons:

1. "The certainty of maternity must be set against the doubt of paternity, however small this doubt may be."
2. "Even in nature, the mother's bond with her child is firmer than the father's".
3. "The mother has the superior influence on the child's religious development".
4. "Jewish law, unable to sanction or recognise a mixed marriage as religiously valid, technically regards the child as legally having a mother only" (I. Jakobovits, "The Timely and the Timeless", Vallentine Mitchell, 1977, pp.198-217).

What I want from God – Ekev

God constantly wants things from us.

An example is the verse in this week's portion, "Now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God want from you, other than to revere the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 10:12).

I have often wondered what would happen if the verse were written the other way, telling God what we humans wanted from Him. What would we say?

Maybe, "Now, O Lord our God, what do your children want from You, other than to protect Your children, to keep them safe, them and their children: to love them, and to bless them with every spiritual and material blessing"?

God would probably answer, "But that is what I do already!"

We would say, "Yes, but You don't always show the love, support and blessing in the way we want.

"You seem to let the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, You send us blessings but not always when we want them and in the

amounts we desire, You promise us Your protection but we often feel bereft in the cold and dark, waiting for Your intervention which is late when it comes...".

The conversation could go on for ever. The problem is that we don't find it easy to understand the way He governs His universe.

I once turned the discussion into a Yom Kippur sermon in which I asked, "What would happen if we decided to advertise for another God? Just theoretically of course, but would we get a different deal from another God?"

Last week I heard a rabbi speak about another side of the question, "If we ran the world, would we do it better?"

The rabbi's answer to his own musing was, "If we were God and we ran the world, we probably wouldn't do it differently. We would still be too small and ephemeral to grasp the higher levels of world management."

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev used to have these conversations with God all the time. He once said something which would probably resonate with all of us, "God, I don't ask You to let me run the world. I don't even ask You to explain why I suffer. I only ask You to assure me that the suffering is for Your sake!"

The real blessing – Ré'eh

It is a stark choice at the beginning of the sidra: we can have blessings, and we can have curses. The choice is in our hands.

The blessing is “if you hearken to the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day” (Deut. 11:27).

The obvious way of understanding this verse is like this: opt for blessing, hearken to God, have blessing.

What kind of blessing? Corn, wine and oil. Prosperity, satiety, security. Joy, peace, serenity.

An alternative interpretation goes like this: there will be blessing “if you hearken”: i.e. the blessing is that you hearken.

The greatest blessing is not material but spiritual, not earthly but ethereal. You are blessed by knowing there is a God, blessed by knowing you are in His presence, blessed by hearing His call and responding to His voice. The blessings that come from this world are not nearly as great as those which link earth to heaven. The way to those blessings is spelt out in the portion: “Choose!”

All very well, but can one consciously choose to believe?

Intellectually, one can place the arguments for belief in one column and the arguments for non-belief in another. It is possible that one will be more convinced by the first column, but also possible that the second column will prevail.

And even if one says, “Logic tells me to believe”, is there a guarantee that real belief will follow?

The approach of the verse that says, “Hearken”, is quite different. It says, “Look at the majesty of Creation, at the grandeur of the human spirit, at the magnificence of the Creator. Hear the wind in the trees, the rustle of the leaves, the still small voice of conscience and morality.

“How can your eyes not see and your ears not hear? How can you perceive reality and not believe?”

Reptiles on your back – Shof'tim

Why do we blame our leaders when things go wrong?

Look at the end of the sidra. A dead man is found. No-one knows who has slain him. Officials measure the distance to the nearest town.

Whatever town is nearest to the body, its elders have to wash their hands and say, “Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. O God, absolve Your people Israel, and let not guilt for innocent blood remain among Your people Israel.”

The natural response of the reader is, “But why do the elders need to be so apologetic? If a murder occurs, surely it is some criminal element amongst the people that is responsible. Why suspect the leaders?”

The commentators explain: “Perhaps the man who was later found dead had asked for hospitality, and the elders refused to help. Perhaps he sought food, and they left him hungry. Perhaps he was in pain, and they did not want to hear his cry!”

The problem is so modern. Today one of the gravest challenges to society is the widespread disillusionment with leaders. We live in an instant information era; all that a leader does is seen, scrutinised and debated, almost before it happens.

No-one can expect unquestioning applause or adulation just because they hold an office or bear a title. People power will not allow it. It makes life harder for leaders, but it makes for better leadership.

The Torah describes the way Moses consecrated Aaron and his sons to the priesthood. Taking drops of sacrificial blood, Moses “put it on the tip of Aaron’s right ear and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot” (Lev. 8:23).

Of all the parts of the body, why were ear, hand and foot singled out for this ritual?

The first answer that springs to mind is that the kohen’s ears must hear the commands of the Almighty, his hands carry out the Divine will, and his feet walk in God’s ways.

Another insight is offered by the Baal Had’rash V’ha’iyyun who suggests that in putting drops of blood, the symbol of life and vitality, upon the ear, hand and foot, Moses was indicating the qualities required by a good leader.

With an attentive ear, he must be aware of the needs of his people and generation. With an energetic hand, he must act in the people’s interests and dedicate himself to their welfare.

Continued...

And his foot, the representation of movement, must never stand still but ensure he moves along the path of personal and professional growth and progress.

People power increasingly imposes standards on leaders and insists on knowing why some of those in the public eye fall short of the appropriate standards. It also takes for granted that whatever goes wrong in society, the leader cannot be absolved from blame.

True, it is often unfair to expect the leader to see everything and know how to fix it, but if all the leader can do is to throw up his or her hands in despair and look for excuses elsewhere, that's not leadership.

Leadership, to adapt a rabbinic phrase, is a basket of reptiles on your back. You may not have put them there yourself, but you cannot merely wait for the basket to slide off of its own accord.

Leadership requires that you use your ear, hand and foot to recognise problems and be capable of initiatives to find a solution.

Coat of many colours – Ki Tetzei

Two of the mitzvot in the sidra are concerned with clothing – the law against sha'atnez and the requirement of tzitzit (Deut. 22:11-12).

Clothes are a very important symbol in Jewish tradition. They are a mark of modesty, dignity and identity. The garments you wear generally tell a great deal about who you are.

The rule is that no-one, especially a scholar, should wear shabby and dirty clothes. Nor should one go about in ostentatious clothing or wear garments identified with less respectable elements in society (in Talmudic times, indeed, certain colours were associated with promiscuity).

Clothes also express your Jewish identity. Sha'atnez (a mixture of wool and linen) is amongst the forbidden mixtures enumerated by the Torah. Tzitzit are a badge of Jewishness.

A person's clothing should include headcovering for both men and married women to show humility in the presence of God. Garments should not be skimpy or suggestive. Shoes should be worn. All this is part of the halachic pattern of Judaism.

There is another level on which clothing speaks volumes. Chassidic teaching refers to the good deeds one does as garments of the soul.

The meditation said on putting on the tallit includes the prayer, "As I cover myself with the tallit in this world, so may my soul merit to be clothed with a beautiful spiritual robe in the world to come in the Garden of Eden".

There are also ethical garments. Eshet Chayil, recited on Friday night and on other occasions when we pay tribute to the woman of worth, declares, "Strength and majesty are her clothing".

In a poetic sense God, too, is clothed in garments: the psalm for Fridays (Psalm 93) describes Him as robed in majesty and strength.

A modern rabbi says, "We can defile ourselves by donning a garment of dishonesty and corruption. Every person can sink to the depths of moral depravity by becoming green with envy, red with rage, yellow with cowardice, or black-hearted with cruelty. Every one of us, therefore, has the potentiality of wearing a coat of many colours" (Emanuel Levy).

There are those who say, "Who cares what you wear?". Judaism does. Your clothing is part of you and always has been, from the moment at the beginning of human history when Adam and Eve invented dress sense and sewed garments out of fig leaves!



Wandering Arameans & multiculturalism – Ki Tavo

The sidra begins with wandering Jews.
A person bringing the first fruits to the sanctuary made a declaration that began,
“A wandering Aramean was my father”
(Deut. 26:1-3).

This verse is used in an unusual way in the Haggadah, which applies it to the hostility between Laban and Jacob and translates the Hebrew, “An Aramean sought to destroy my ancestor”. But looked at as the words stand, it tells you a number of interesting things.

The most obvious is that migration has always been part of Jewish history: from Cain, who became a nomad as a punishment; through Abraham, who wandered in response to a Divine call, and Jacob and Moses, who fled from persecution; to the Children of Israel, who traversed the desert on the way to the Promised Land – they are a paradigm of what has happened through the centuries.

But there is a question to be asked. Once you have reached a haven, how do you handle what went before?

The one thing that never works is to try to erase it and to wipe out the past. I am who I am because of where I have been and what has happened to me as well as what I have consciously achieved with my life.

This is one of the reasons why the opponents of Australian multiculturalism are unfair and illogical. Implying that migrants should push their past so far down inside them that it is virtually invisible on the surface is not only psychologically impossible.

It also fails to take account of the fact that we all enriched by our differences, including our varied baggage from the past.

And apart from this, has the push for sameness ever really succeeded? Did it for example make an Australian less so by still speaking with, say, an Irish or Scottish accent decades after arriving as a migrant?

Has every society not been reshaped many times in small if not large ways as the result of immigration?

If it is acceptable to be an Australian who still has a strong memory of and feeling for Leeds, London or Liverpool, why should a person be denied a cultural link with their native Turkey or Thailand? Surely our society can cope and be thereby enriched.

Three types of penitence – Nitzavim

The verse, “You shall return to the Lord your God” (Deut. 30:2), is one of the basic sources of the idea of penitence, turning back to God.

The traditional meaning is of sinners recognising, rueing, repenting and abandoning their sins, and in that sense the High Holyday services are full of penitence.

A second shade of meaning is of a Jew coming back to Judaism from the periphery of Jewish life, re-adopting the ways of belief and observance.

In that sense the current age is one of what has been called reversionism, Jews rediscovering their tradition and reverting to its practice.

“Reversioners” are, thank God, everywhere in today’s Jewish world. Janet Aviad has written a whole book on the phenomenon as we find it in the State of Israel.

The sages say, Lo alman Yisra’el, “Israel is not bereft”, and these words have the ring of prophecy come true.

In addition, an Israeli writer, Ehud Luz, points out that even this does not exhaust the meaning of teshuvah, return.

The word certainly means repentance and return – but it also connotes response. In that sense every human being sometimes feels a compelling call to do something, to show his or her loyalty and commitment, to regain his or her place in the spectrum of human responsibility.

Franz Rosenzweig used theological categories to explain it when he said that sometimes, even when we least expect it, God calls to us and says, “I am the Lord your God. I call you out of love. Your response is to love the Lord your God. This is God calling – please respond by loving Me.”

The rabbi can't win – Vayelech

As the Torah brings us to the end of Moses' career it is appropriate to consider what a hard time the people of Israel gave him.

They constantly complained and criticised. Wherever he went, whatever he did, it was always the wrong place and the wrong thing.

It is amazing how much he endured, usually without answering back or giving the people what we today call a serve.

What the Israelites did to Moses, later generations tended to do to their own rabbis.

Sigmund Freud argued that the Israelites turned on Moses in the desert and actually killed him. Freud was not a great Biblical scholar and had little evidence on which to base his claim, but congregations are frequently Freudian in the way they seem to want not just to belittle the rabbi but undermine him and kill his career.

I have heard it said that if the rabbi's sermons are short, he has little learning and has nothing much to say; if the sermons are long, he is out of touch and above everybody's heads.

If he is well proportioned, he spends too much time eating at simchat; if he is thin, he is such a scarecrow that he gives you a fright.

If he spends time studying, the congregation want a rabbi who has already finished his training; if he is never seen reading a book, he is nothing but a social butterfly.

If he is good with the gentiles, he is neglecting his congregation; if he does no public work, he is insular and narrow-minded.

If he has a pleasant voice, they say, "We already have a chazan"; if he can't sing in tune, they say, "He's a luxury and we can't afford him".

If his wife dresses badly, she has no respect for her husband's office; if she dresses well, the congregation must be paying the rabbi too much.

If the rabbi's children run around the shule, their father ought to teach them how to behave; if they sit quietly, their father must be bullying them too much.

Someone said, "If everyone loves the rabbi, he's no rabbi... and if nobody loves him, he's no mensch".

The rabbi simply can't win.

I'm my own grandpa – Ha'azinu

I think it was a music-hall song and its refrain was "I'm my own grandpa".

I don't remember the words and I suspect they have another nuance altogether, but now that I am a grandfather I think the words were written for me.

We all need a mentor: and when we are young our grandparents often perform that service for us.

The Torah actually commands us in Parashat Ha'azinu, "Ask your father and he will tell you, your grandfather and he will declare to you" (Deut. 32:7).

The problem is what happens when we become older and our grandparents are no longer alive. Nor in some cases are our parents still with us. Where do we go for a shoulder to cry on, a word of advice, a loving rebuke?

Without a grandpa we become our own grandpa. Youngsters come to us in the same way that we once went to our elders. When we ourselves need wisdom and counsel we have to rely on ourselves.

One answer is suggested by the rabbis' interpretation of the Joseph story; when faced with decisions, "the image of his father appeared in his mind's eye", and he worked out what his father would have said or done.

Another approach is to go to our Heavenly Parent for guidance. Prayer may reveal the answer; consulting the Divine Word in the Torah certainly will.

Time to go – V'zot Hab'rachah

The end of the Torah marks the death of Moses.

According to the rabbis, Moses tried to hang on.

God said, "It is time for Joshua to lead the people and for you to die".

Moses replied, "Let me live and have Joshua as my teacher."

God agreed.

Moses went to Joshua's tent and stood at the back trying to be inconspicuous.

The people noticed him and asked Joshua, "Is it right for you to sit whilst your teacher Moses stands?"

Joshua saw Moses was there and said, "Moses, teach us Torah!"

Moses refused, so Joshua continued the lesson.

Later the people said, "Moses, please explain the lesson", but Moses said, "I can't".

He turned to God and said, "Master of the World, the time has come. I now wish to die"...

We learn a vital lesson from the story.

There is a time to step down and to leave your successor in charge. If you have gone you have to go. Not necessarily to die, but to say, "My chapter has come to an end".

Too often people try to hang on after leaving office or retiring from business. If you are wise you will say, as a Simchat Torah poem reports of Moses, "Yehoshua bin Nun, look after my flock".

Joshua will not be a clone of Moses. He will win his own victories as Moses won his.

What should a Moses do at that point?

Not get in the way. Become immersed in a new interest. Make new friends. Have no regrets.





THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE
- SYDNEY -

ק"ק בית ישראל