

In pursuit of justice at the Kotel

Viewpoint



RABBI FRED MORGAN

ON Wednesday last week, the director of Beit Samuelli, the Reform synagogue in Ra'anana, was shocked when he found offensive graffiti on the walls of the building. The building had been vandalised several times before. But this time it was different.

There was also an envelope. On top of the envelope was a knife inscribed with halachic references justifying the act of murder. The envelope contained the names of three individuals, Rabbi Gilad Kariv, the head of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism; Anat Hoffman, the director of the Israel Religious Action Centre; and Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the head of the American Union for Reform Judaism. The graffiti on the building included a verse from Ovadiah that calls for the murder of heretics.

The director of Beit Samuelli, Yossi Cohen, a sabra whom many of us knew when he was shaliach in Australia some years ago, said that his hands were shaking at the death threats.

Three preschool groups meet at that synagogue. The children would have been welcomed to their play that morning by these signs of hatred and violence.

The graffiti referred in rabbinic style to the events that took place at the Kotel a fortnight before.

Time after time, the Netanyahu government has reneged on its promise to provide a permanent egalitarian prayer space at the Kotel. Torah teaches us to pursue justice in a just manner. On this occasion, a line of rabbis from the non-Orthodox movements slowly brought Torah scrolls to the Kotel for Rosh Chodesh prayers. They were allowed peacefully through the security gates, but as soon as they entered the main plaza they were attacked by self-styled "Torah true" Jews who tried to wrest the scrolls from their hands. In an act of nonviolent resistance, the rabbis hugged the scrolls even closer to their chests. One of them later told me how terrified he felt for his own safety and for the safety of the scroll whose holiness he was seeking to protect.



The vandalism at Beit Samuelli.

Photo: Facebook/JTA

Eventually the rabbis were able to hand the scrolls over to the women who formed Rosh Chodesh minyanim in the women's section at the Kotel.

For some Jews, the idea of women reading from Torah is anathema. It is sometimes argued that the Temple is sacred space and the sexes have been segregated there for 2000 years. People who argue this way overlook the fact that the Kotel plaza is not the Temple and never was. Before the 1967 Six-Day War, there was no plaza there at all, just a narrow lane where men and women walked together. The Kotel plaza is land that is owned by the state on behalf of Jews everywhere.

The language [many Orthodox rabbis] use in print and from the bimah ... risks inciting those inclined to fanaticism to translate their words into acts of violence.

However, the plaza is supervised by a small group of state-appointed Orthodox rabbis who have attempted to turn it into a virtual synagogue. Growing numbers of both Israelis and Diaspora Jews no longer accept this artificial status quo. They feel that an injustice has occurred regarding the Kotel plaza. This has led to the current state of affairs in which people wishing to read from the Torah in the pursuit of spiritual goals are attacked by others who claim to be the defenders of the one true faith.

I leave it to the reader to decide which group showed more *menschlichkeit* and modelled truer

Jewish values, the Jews who were attacked for seeking to practice Judaism in a progressive manner, or their "Torah true" attackers who claim the sole right to say how Jews should worship.

Some have labelled the victims of these malicious attacks as "provocateurs". We've heard that before in Jewish history, never to our benefit. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his latest book *Not in God's Name*, predicts the behaviour of fanatics of all religious persuasions, including fanatical Jews, who hate others enough over matters of observance to want to see them dead.

There are many Orthodox rabbis and others in this country who would never dream of physically attacking another Jew, yet the language they use in print and from the bimah is so antagonistic towards Jews who practise Judaism in a different manner from their own that it risks inciting those inclined to fanaticism to translate their words into acts of violence.

Showing great leadership, the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) straightaway published a statement unequivocally condemning this act of vandalism against the Reform synagogue in Ra'anana. We are heartened to see that the Rabbinical Council of Victoria has endorsed the statement of the RCA. When synagogues are attacked anywhere, it is an attack on all Jews everywhere. Whatever the source of such an act, even if it comes from self-proclaimed "Torah true" Jews, our response must be the same: violence, whether of speech or of action, in the pursuit of religious truth is not in God's name.

Rabbi Fred Morgan is Movement Rabbi, Union for Progressive Judaism.

So long, Leonard Cohen

Viewpoint



RABBI RALPH GENENDE

MAYA Angelou once wrote: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will even forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

I don't think I will ever forget how Leonard Cohen made me feel. I can remember exactly where I was around 1970 when I first heard his early songs on my sister Chana's tape recorder. I was startled by the freshness and the darkness: it was unlike anything I'd ever heard before. He immediately became one of my rabbis, he invited me into the "tower of song", he encouraged me to journey into the universe of words.

Like Noah, who set sail into the black waves on his teivah or ark, he set me sail into the interior landscape of the teivah, the word – in Hebrew a teivah is both a word and an ark.

Cohen made me feel real, he understood the terrors of my unarticulated young heart, he beckoned to a sensuous unexplored terrain. It was the music, it was the lyrics, it was the mystery and the clarity.

Ever since then, I've always had a Leonard Cohen line or song close to me. Even as news came in about his death, I was surrounded by my collection of his music in my car, on my iPod, on my computer and on Spotify.

Cohen became one of my muses; I read his poetry, I imitated his lyrics. His voice was always present when I wrote and I dedicated one of my youthful poems to him. His poignant *Bird on the Wire* was the source: "Like a bird on the wire, like a drunk in a midnight choir, I have tried in my way to be free."

Struggling with the reality of the Soweto Riots in 1976, the anguish, helplessness and seeming futility of any personal response, I turned to Cohen and wrote: "Stood, stood below the clammy concrete man, Stood protesting, So could I say I tried."

It was my own somewhat inept response to the injustice and the unravelling of apartheid, but it was at least a response and Cohen had helped me get there.

The lyrics of this fine and haunting song include the heartbreaking lines: "Like a baby stillborn, Like a beast with his horn, I have torn everyone who reached out to me."

It beautifully captures how we so easily (and often inadvertently) most cruelly hurt and betray those who try to help us. It's also a song about regret and



Leonard Cohen.
Photo: AJN file/Ron Huban

sorrow and the possibility of redemption, and actually something of a religious poem: "But I swear by this song, And by all that I have done wrong, I will make it all up to thee."

Cohen was, for me, not just another tortured poet but a struggling Jew. He may have become a Buddhist monk but he never saw this as a rejection or denial of his Jewishness. In response to Allen Ginsberg's enquiry of how he could reconcile his Judaism with Zen, Cohen replied that he wasn't looking for a new religion, that Zen made no mention of God and was a discipline rather than a religion. "I put on these robes because that was Rosh's [the Zen master] school and that was the uniform."

I may have been bothered by Cohen's Buddhism, but as a believer in Cohen he only deepened my faith in my Judaism and my faith in my doubt. Some of his best pieces are deeply Jewish in their substance and style.

Hallelujah is the analysis of King David and his complex, paradoxical psalms. It's a song about music and the word: "I've heard there was a sacred chord, That David played and it pleased the Lord."

It's also about spirituality and sexuality, and a king with a voracious appetite for both; a subject which our rabbis and commentators were acutely aware of. Ultimately it's a song that speaks so powerfully to so many because it's about the complex and messy business of life, the paradox of life's beauty and brokenness, the darkness and the light and the subtle interplay between them: life's broken Hallelujah.

I have grown up with Leonard Cohen. I have become a grown up, in part, because of Cohen. He has helped me grow, helped me discover how "the crack in everything" is what lets "the light get in". He enchanted me with the aching beauty of his lyrics, the sad music of his humanity; he has helped me recognise my own appetites and how to say "Hineni" to my God. (*Hineni* is the name of one of his final songs.) He has depressed with his darkness and lifted me with his vision. He has inspired me with his social consciousness and eerie prescience: "From the brave, the bold, the battered heart of Chevrolet, Democracy is coming to the USA."

So I say "so long" not only to Marianne, who died earlier this year, but to my friend and mentor Leonard Cohen: you who tried so hard to be free are now free.

Rabbi Ralph Genende is rabbi of Caulfield Hebrew Congregation.

MEDIA WEEK

Recycling Iranian myths

IN the *Canberra Times* (18/11), Professor Amin Saikal warned against allowing Israel to persuade Donald Trump to fulfil a pre-election promise to scrap the Iran nuclear deal.

Saikal said Iran's nuclear program was for "civilian use", which is ludicrous considering successive International Atomic Energy Agency reports identified key elements of Iran's nuclear program as having no conceivable purpose other than for nuclear weapons production.

He said the deal "broke the cycle of hostilities that had featured in US-Iranian relations since the Iranian revolution of 1978/79". Actually, if anything, recent official Iranian anti-US propaganda has

matched its 1980s high-water mark.

According to Saikal, "Tehran agreed to dramatically reduce its uranium enrichment and forgo the possibility of producing nuclear weapons."

Iran did not "forgo the possibility", it merely agreed to limit its enrichment for a decade. Even so, it has twice exceeded agreed heavy water limits and tested ballistic missiles, intended to carry nuclear warheads, bearing the message "Israel must be wiped out" on their sides.

According to Saikal, the deal "avoid[s] a war, which Israel and its American supporters have advocated". Another factual error. In his March 2015 Congress speech, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu said sanctions should continue and that

"the alternative to this bad deal is a much better deal", not war.

Saikal also claimed Trump supports ending the "two-state solution". Untrue. Trump backs direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians and has spoken of his desire to help broker a two-state resolution.

King hit

FIVE days later, while interviewing Jordanian King Abdullah, ABC TV *Lateline* host Tony Jones channelled Saikal, appearing to take for granted that the King supports the Iran deal and only Israel is opposed. Jones asked, "The big question mark ... is whether Trump will be persuaded by Israel to drop that deal ... do you think he would?"

Eschewing the chance to indulge in pro forma Israel-bashing, Abdullah changed the topic, replying, "I wouldn't want to speculate on that."

Jones asked again, "Would it upset the balance of power if the Americans decided, urged by the Israelis, to drop it?" Abdullah again ignored Israel and focused entirely on Iran's behaviour, saying, "Iran has been responsible in inciting sectarian conflict ... they have several cards that they play. So one of them is the nuclear card ... they do support organisations that sometimes are considered terrorist in nature ... when you look at Iran you have to look at it in its totality."

Jones seemed to think that King Abdullah had agreed that ending the

deal would be bad, telling the King, "yeah because I'm thinking too how ... countries with really serious interests in Syria, whether that balance could be upset by something like that?"

So, once more, Abdullah made it clear beyond a doubt who the region's main stabiliser is, saying, "You have to understand that Iran does impact, well Afghanistan on one side, but Iraq, Syria, Lebanon to an extent, we have issues in Yemen, and we have some problems in Africa." The reality is that Israel's Arab Sunni neighbours, including Jordan and Saudi Arabia, are as vehemently opposed to the Obama-Iranian deal as Israel is.

ALLON LEE