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March 2015 Adar–Nisan 5775

לולב *lulav*

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issue 3

From the Edinburgh Liberal Jewish Community

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6	Kabbalat Shabbat MSG 6.15
7	Cheder MSG 3.30
13	Erev Shabbat CC 7.00
20	Kabbalat Shabbat MSG 6.15
21	Cheder MSG 3.30
28	Shabbat Morning Service CC 11.00 Tea and Talmud CC 3.00
29	Philosophy Reading Group CC 4.00

April

3	Erev Shabbat/Erev Pesach First-Night Seder <i>See p. 3</i> MSG 6.45
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Venues

CC	Columcille Centre 2 Newbattle Terrace
MSG	Marchmont St Giles 1a Kilgraston Road
CCM	Christ Church Morningside 6a Morningside Road

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Urgent Support Only for use in emergency; alerts the whole Welfare Team 0131 208 1447

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Website www.eljc.org

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<i>Lulav Editor</i>	Catherine Lyons	<i>Membership</i>	Sharon Goldwater



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Word from the Chair

Purim is with us, with its stories of masking and unmasking, of role reversal and the triumph of the perennial underdog. In the telling and retelling of the story in the form of the Purimspiel, elements of farce and mockery are allowed and, indeed, encouraged. So upside down do elements of the story become that in a way it becomes reminiscent of the curious logic that pervades Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. The Mad Hatter's tea party takes place in the garden of the March Hare's house and as we all know the festival of Purim occurs in March. Hence the following story.

"Oh my whiskers, oh my Monides, where are my notes?" the White Rabbi asked, pulling out his phone. "I'll be late, I'll be late for Tea and Talmud. How do I get to the March Hare's house, which way do I go from here?" An irritating Chair spoke out in a pompous voice and said inappropriately "According to the Annotated Alice, it says in the Talmud, if you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there. I'll come with you".

They went through a hedge and saw in front of them a red brick house. "Oh that must be the March Hare's house", exclaimed the White Rabbi, "because its chimneys are sticking out like ears! They are surely the Oznei Haman (Haman's Ears or hamantaschen) that are eaten at the tea party which follows the Purim story I am dealing with today."

"I don't think that's quite relevant," quibbled the irritating Chair, "March Hare is just a corruption of Marsh Hare and I'm having difficulty pulling my legs out of this morass."

In the back garden a table was laid with tea things. Playing host was a character in a three-cornered hat labelled one and a half shekalim. "Off with his hat!" cried the Duchess seated a little further down the table, "I'm sure it's edible, stuffed full of poppy seeds, and he'll try to eat it all himself."

The King, for this was a Royal Garden Party, named Ahasu..., Ahasu.... Enough already; Atishoo, sneezed from across the table, "What else is to be said against this Black Hat person?" His Queen, the beautiful young Esther said, "Let me remind you of certain events.

You see that good-looking elderly gentleman over there in the kilt? Well that's Och Aye, the hero of this story and also my uncle. Well one day Och Aye noticed that two villains were plotting to kill you by feeding you poisoned haggis. Och Aye let the guard know and so saved your life. It's the Dormouse over there who should read to you about such deeds recorded in the Chronicles of the Kingdom, but look at him, asleep as usual. "At that moment the Dormouse awoke and began to sing.

"Twinkle, Twinkle little black hat,
How I wonder what you're at
Firmly nestled on his head
Like a teapot blue and red."

"Ignore him," Esther said, "the villainous Black Hat tried to claim that he had saved you, my King. As reward he wanted to remove his black hat and parade round in your crown, a real meshuggene Hatter. But you put your crown on Och Aye's head to be led round by Black Hat man who was shamed and humilihatted."

He plotted revenge on Och Aye and all the Jews of Scotland. He cast lots and the lot fell on this very day. "Oh no" said King Atishoo, "This shall not be, what Black Hat wants for you two and all the Jews shall befall him and his offspring instead." "Off with their hats and their heads!" said the Duchess. The sentence was executed although, as the irritating Chair remarked to the White Rabbi, "This was rather an odd way to put it since it was Black Hat and sons who were executed not the sentence."



John Tenniel's Mad Hatter (Wikipedia)

Norman Crane

By order of the Court of Ahasuerus you are summoned to attend a Royal Feast

Come and read of the Glorious Deeds and Dastardly Plots recorded in the Ancient Book of Esther.

Wednesday 4 March at [Christ Church Morningside](#) (Topsy turvy? Yes!), 7.00.

Dress: Outlandish

Noisey Toys: Bring lots!

Food: Bring some! (Veggie or permitted fish, or hamantaschen and other rebellious sweetmeats.)

Drink: Definitely bring some!

Be There or Be Banished! (February's *Lulav* had the date wrong, but don't let that stop you!)

The Season of our Freedom

The first night of Pesach, Erev Shabbat, **3 April**, will see us gather, as usual, at Marchmont St Giles. The [Seder Booking Form](#) is available now. *Please book before 25 March.*

If you are able to lend a seder plate for the occasion, please contact Norman and Wendy Crane via the [Contact Page](#).

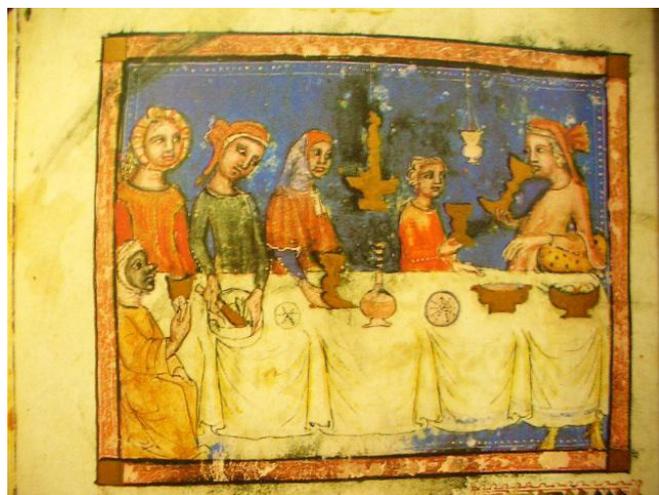
This year, in conjunction with the Church of Scotland's congregation at Marchmont St Giles, and the Muslim Women's Association of Edinburgh, we will be cohosting an exhibition of Righteous Muslims, which tells the stories of Muslims, notably in South-East Europe and North Africa, who hid Jews from the Nazis. The exhibition is timed to coincide with Pesach, in order to celebrate the saving of the 14th Century Sarajevo Haggadah. Originating in Catalonia before the Expulsion from Spain, it survived Nazi destruction hidden under the floor of a mosque in the mountains.

The exhibition is produced by Faith Matters, a Muslim organisation that works to reduce extremism and interfaith and tensions. Faith Matters produced an accompanying book, sadly now out of print, but still available online: [The Role of Righteous Muslims](#).

The book contains an afterword by Clive Lawton, which brings into sharp focus the story that Clara Warshow tells on p. 9.

[M]ost of the personal wickedness of the Shoah was not driven by deep ideology and theological convictions, but on small acts of viciousness, lack of empathy, fear, sadism, ignorance, self-seeking and cowardice. In the middle of all of this shine out (too few) heroes, who did the right thing, almost, from their own words, because they couldn't see any alternative if they wanted to live with themselves.

*The exhibition will also be on shown on **15 March** at the SCoJeC Klezmer Ceildh. See p. 7*



The Seder Table, Sarajevo Haggadah

Photo from talmud.de

Mazel Tov to Melissa and Yonatan

Melissa and Yonatan are the proud parents of Sorcha (Sarah) Rita Eisenberg, who arrived on 18 February, weighing 8 lbs 13 ounces. Sorcha Rita is named in honour of two great grandmothers. (Sorcha is Irish for Sarah.)



The Great Big Challah Bake



On Wednesday **29 April** at 6.30, we will be holding a Challah Baking Session at Marchmont St Giles. The session will be led by challah maker extraordinaire, Paul McPhail. You will learn how to make challah and put what you learn into practice. You will also be shown different braiding techniques. Of course, you can take home what you bake!

All you need to bring is yourself and an apron/clothes you don't mind getting floury!

Spaces need to be reserved in advance. To book your place, please email Cathleen Ferguson: caferg@hotmail.co.uk.

Helen Zollinger

Photo: Bonton Bakery, Alberta, Canada

Swimming against Cancer

A few months ago, I started working as a community fundraiser for Marie Curie Cancer Care, a charity that provides care for people with terminal cancer and other terminal illnesses.

Marie Curie has teamed up with Swimathon and, in April, people across the UK will be swimming to raise funds for this important cause.



Disclaimer: this is a stock image from Swimathon and not actually the Lulav editor

One of these people is our very own *Lulav* editor, Catherine Lyons, who is taking on this fantastic swimming challenge and will be swimming 5 kilometres in her local pool.

Please support Catherine by donating on [Catherine's Swimathon Page](#).

Money raised will allow Marie Curie to provide care for more people with a terminal illness by a Marie Curie nurse either in their own home or in a local hospice. Giving people the choice about where they want to be during their final days makes this time more special and less stressful for both the patient and their family.

Please sponsor Catherine, or why not join her and sign up to Swimathon too? www.swimathon.org (You can choose to swim 1.5k, 2.5k or 5k.)

Helen Zollinger

Freylach un Tsores and our Annual General Meeting

Formal business was briskly dispensed with, since everyone knew that more interesting activities were ahead of us. Sue Gutteridge and Helen Zollinger were welcomed as new members of council. Gordon Barclay was thanked for his many years as burials convenor, a role from which he has now stepped down. Our treasurer proposed that subscription rates remain the same, and this was agreed. Formal minutes of the proceedings will be published on the website in due course.

Next up was a presentation from Inspector Tom Galbraith of Police Scotland, who provided us with an current overview of Jewish community exposure to threat. Before Tom spoke, our chair, Norman Crane, singled out the Broadies for special appreciation, for their years of security and meet'n'greet commitment.

The UK-wide National Counter Terrorism Security Office (NaCTSO) has increased its evaluation of the likelihood of attack from Moderate to Severe. In the wake of terrorist attacks elsewhere in Europe, there is official concern that an attack somewhere in the UK is a real possibility. The current state of alert is significant for large Jewish populations in England, but, in Tom's view, Scotland is much less at risk, and Edinburgh is generally considered by the police to be a safe place to be.

While the probability of a terrorist attack that would affect our community is infinitesimally small, the severity of such an attack, if it actually were to happen, could be very great. A brief but spirited debate ensued, and Tom remained for the rest of the proceedings so that all present would get a chance to chat to him. The new council will be working with Tom very soon to appraise our current security practices and ensure that our precautions are commensurate with our degree of exposure.

Next up was a small-group activity as part of the Consultation Exercise. Several concrete, but as yet provisional, proposals emerged. There is a tentative plan forming for our rabbi, Mark Solomon, to visit more frequently. (Watch this space.) Some members have volunteered to look after the interests of those in our community who are vulnerable or unwell. Others have undertaken to ensure that this is the only year we don't have a Purim Spiel. Nick Silk may at last have several helpers with the huge list of tasks he undertakes. For the future, we might find ourselves holding an official open day. We may twin our community with Sim Shalom, the Liberal community in Budapest. We will reinvigorate our efforts to find a permanent home.

Events were rounded off with tea and cake, with music and song from a new klezmer group, Freylach un Tsores.

Four Corners for Purim

The Purim issue of [Four Corners](#) is now published on the SCoJeC website. It includes a report of the training course for volunteers who are asked to talk about Judaism in schools. Several of our members attended this course and found it worthwhile.



Community members singing along with Freylach and Tsores
Photo: Rebecca Wober

Progressive rabbis after Paris and Copenhagen: stand firm and open doors; no more 'us and them'

The perpetrators of this violence sought both to close down discussions about freedom of expression and inflict a grievous wound on the local Jewish community. ... Our horror does not minimise our commitment to the value of free speech (even when we do not always like its results) and neither will we retreat from efforts to create good communal relations and a decent society in Europe. As we have said and will continue to say, the best response to closed minds is open doors.

Rabbi Danny Rich, *Chief Executive, Liberal Judaism, 16 February*

Today, Jews are being asked if they are thinking of leaving for Israel. I understand that *aliyah* arouses interest. But that amounts to leaving them to face their responsibilities alone. Let's stop asking Jews if they want to leave and pose the real questions. How are we going to stand firm? What sort of France do we want to build together tomorrow? What solidarity, what empathy are we capable of? What do we do to make the slogans a reality: "Je suis juif", "Je suis musulman" and "Je suis Charlie"? I would rather talk about that than talk about my suitcase. [Translated]

Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur, *Mouvement juif libéral de France, Paris, 14 January, interviewed in [Le Figaro](#)*

[T]he outpouring of support from the surrounding society was tangible. As my sister said: "There's a real feeling of warmth and recognition, which is incredibly comforting." And as for the voices who suggest leaving the country for Israel, the answer has firmly been that we are Danes and we are not going anywhere.

The haze of shock is slowly lifting and other voices are beginning to be heard; some are angry, some fearful, others push a political agenda, a few are dogmatic and many are calling for calm and staying level-headed.

As one friend said: "It's a relief the rest of society now understands that we have a problem; it's a general one for Danish society and a specific one for Jews, and people want to do something constructive about it. The problem is very complex, but the only way forward is to completely get rid of the 'us and them': it's WE, Danes of all persuasions, we are very diverse, and that is OK. Let's not focus on what might happen, but on what we want to happen."

Rabbi Sandra Kviat, *of Liberal Judaism's Crouch End Chavurah, is the first Danish female rabbi. 19 February, [Jewish News](#)*

With these appalling events, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. But the British Jewish historian, David Cesarani, is much more positive. He says the numbers may reflect an increase but it's nothing like a tidal wave of anti-Semitism. What we're actually grappling with is the intended effect of terrorism, which is the replacement of the feeling of security with fear and fragility. ... [M]y colleagues in the Jewish Community Security Trust agree with the views of David Cesarani and they helped restore in me a healthy sense of perspective and calmed my fears.

They said, "These are hard times and many people are scared — but the last thing we should do is to exaggerate these fears or stop being involved in public Jewish life. Resilience is in our DNA."

Rabbi Laura Janner Klausner, *Senior Rabbi, Movement for Reform Judaism, Thought for the Day, BBC Radio 4, 19 February*

Klezmer Ceilidh and Being Jewish in Scotland

Fiona Frank from SCoJeC is organising a afternoon Klezmer Ceilidh with buffet. Before the buffet there will be an opportunity to contribute to a new Being Jewish in Scotland Survey, or, for musicians, a Klezmer workshop. Music will be provided by Freylekhs Brider, a French-Israeli Klezmer trio.

Discussion 12.30–2.00 Being Jewish in Scotland: What's behind the headlines? How does it feel to be Jewish in Scotland today

Musicians' Klezmer Workshop 12.30–2.00 Music will be provided. All levels of player and all instruments are welcome. For copies of the music in advance [email Simon Carlyle](mailto:simon.carlyle@scojec.org.uk).

Klezmer Ceilidh with Freylekhs Brider 2.30–4.30

Suggested donations £10 per person, £3 concessions, children free. To book, [email Fiona Frank](mailto:fiona.frank@scojec.org.uk), or leave a message on the Community Phone.



Amit Weisberger from Freylekhs Brider

Rainbow Jews and Rituals Reconstructed

Ritual Reconstructed will use performance arts to look at the ways in which Jewish people who identify as LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex) engage in religious and community life. Based in Liberal Judaism's Rainbow Jews project, Ritual Reconstructed is a collaboration between Jewish LGBTQI communities and researchers working in diversity, community relations, and the creative industries. It is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and managed by Liberal Judaism's Surat Shaan Knan at the Montagu Centre.

The project will consider how being LGBTQI has influenced Jewish rituals. Activities will be based around London and Portsmouth, but the project is reaching out to other LGBTQI and Jewish communities. Email Surat Shaan Knan at [Ritual Reconstructed](mailto:surat@ritualreconstructed.com).



Rainbow Challah: whatjewwannaeat.com

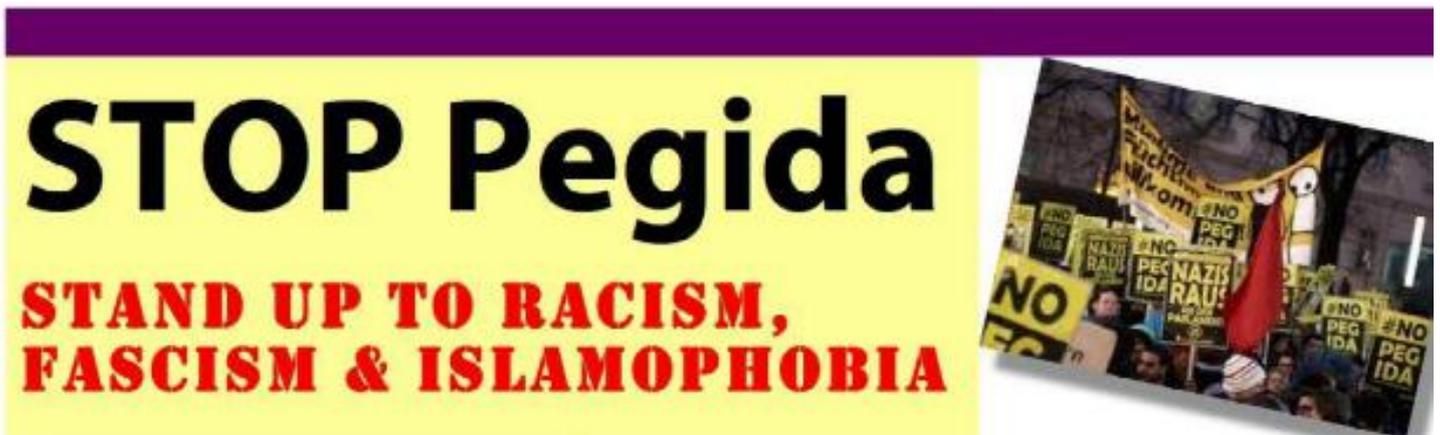
Divided City, Divided Self: Muriel Spark in Jerusalem

Dr Nina Fischer, Edgar Astaire Fellow in Jewish Studies, will be giving a public lecture on **23 March**, at New College. In 1965, Muriel Spark published her 'half-Jewish novel' *The Mandelbaum Gate* (the only crossing point between Israeli-controlled and Jordanian-controlled Jerusalem). *The Mandelbaum Gate* suggests that seeing more than one story might be a way of overcoming division.

Nina Fischer's research concerns Memory, Holocaust, and Middle Eastern Studies. She is writing a book on cultural representations of Jerusalem from the 19th century until today. see more information on Edinburgh's [Jewish Studies website](http://www.ed.ac.uk/jewish-studies). To book (free) tickets, visit [Eventbrite](https://www.eventbrite.com).



Muriel Spark, 1960 (Wikipedia)



Purim reminds us to stand up against hate

Catherine Lyons

Purim is a time of fun, for feeling the particular pleasure that comes after a threat has been diffused. In our celebrations, Haman (hiss! boo!) is reduced to being a pantomime villain. But in the Book of Esther, he is in fact a powerful political figure bent on rousing the populace to turn against each other, on escalating social tensions, and inciting hate crimes. Esther risks all to defy him.

There is a growing tide of far-right hate groups, and growing numbers of hate-crime, Islamophobic and Antisemitic. In Scotland, the voices of hate are increasingly raised in our streets. This month, would-be Hamans are marching through Edinburgh. Twice. The Islamophobic Scottish Defence League is marching through Edinburgh on 14 March. The German Islamophobic Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamicisation of the West) has now spawned a Scottish offshoot. Pegida Scotland is assembling in Edinburgh on 21 March.

As the Edinburgh Liberal Jewish Community, we are members of United Against Fascism (UAF). Our chair, Norman Crane, has addressed a UAF meeting at the Mosque and talked about the parallels between the Antisemitic bullying of his youth and the Islamophobia we see today. Just as Jews were once blamed for society's problems and regarded with disdain and contempt, Muslims in Europe today are being treated as if they are alien, uncivilised, and don't belong.

On **21 March**, there will be a *Stand up to Racism and Fascism* national demonstration in Glasgow to coincide with other demonstrations across Europe that weekend, to mark United Nations Anti-racism Day. Marching in the streets does not come naturally to many of us. But we must nevertheless be prepared to stand up and be counted. As shocked and horrified as we are by the attacks in Paris and Copenhagen, we must not lose the power to act. Attacks on Jews make it all the more important for us to challenge hate against others. Like the Muslims who defended the synagogue in Oslo, we in our community must pledge our support to our Muslim neighbours in Edinburgh and across Scotland, and speak out against those who thrive on hate and fear. *Nous sommes Esther*.

For full details, see [Edinburgh Against the Racist SDL](#) on Facebook.

Celter Schmelter at the Traverse

Gica Loening's Klezmer Trio is playing at the Traverse Theatre Café Bar on Monday 9 March, in celebration of a newly launched Celter Schmelter CD. The music starts at 8.00 and tickets are £10. Contact the [Traverse Box Office](#).



The Triumph over Evil of Random Acts of Kindness

Last month's Lulav featured a review of Ela Weissberger's presentation at the Holocaust Commemoration, held at Boroughmuir High School. Ela was one of several powerful and inspiring speakers. Another was Clara Warshow, a pupil at the school. Clara and her family have long been friends of our community. Lulav is pleased to be able to publish Clara's presentation.

Clara Warshow

I am here to talk about the experience of one woman, a relative of mine who thankfully is still with us today. Her name is Mary Frydenberg and she is my great grandmother's cousin. Her experiences illustrate many times over the resilience of the human spirit and the power of random acts of kindness, each a small defiant stand in the face of evil.

Mary was born in 1925 in Warsaw, the capital of Poland, and moved with her family to the city of Łódź. When the Nazis invaded Poland and established the Warsaw ghetto, Mary and her family, like other Polish Jews, were sent to the ghetto to segregate them from other Poles and prepare them for deportation to the concentration camps. Mary was a short teenager and frequently managed to escape from the ghetto to obtain food for her family and friends, risking a death sentence each time. Once she was caught by a Polish policeman but the fact she had attended a catholic school, could pass as a Polish Catholic, and did not look stereotypically Jewish, saved her life.



Mary Frydenberg

One day the Nazis rounded up a large number of Jews, including Mary's family, and sent them to Treblinka, a concentration camp deep in the forest of Poland, where they were all murdered. Only Mary and her sister were spared because they had been separated by chance from the rest of the family in a different part of the ghetto.

Later the Nazis came for Mary and her sister and they were both sent to Majdanek concentration camp, which was located in the suburbs of the Polish city of Lublin. They were then transported from Majdanek to Auschwitz, where Mary was sent to work in the laundry.

One day, Mary fell over in the snow, breaking her wrist, and was immediately rounded up by an SS officer demanding she be marched straight to the gas chamber as she could no longer work. However the female SS officer in charge of the laundry stood up for her, shouting "She's my best worker, even with one hand!" and, refusing to let her be taken away, she ensured Mary worked out of sight until her wrist healed.

Mary's sister became ill with Typhus, and died. Mary also became ill with Typhus and was sent to the infirmary, where a German officer in the camp told Mary he would hide medicines under a tree to help her recover. He kept his word and Mary did not die of Typhus.

As the war was ending and the Russians were closing in on Auschwitz, the Germans, who had kept meticulous records of what they had done, tried to cover up their activities by marching the survivors westwards back into Germany, in the hope that most would die on the way.

Mary was on that death march and had already marched many miles when she felt she could take no more. She approached a German guard and said, "I am finished. You may as well kill me now because I cannot walk any further". The German guard responded, "No, I am not going to kill you, you are going to sleep tonight and tomorrow morning you are going to run in that direction, towards a German town which I know has already been taken by the Americans." "You'll just shoot me," she said. "No I won't shoot. You will have to trust me." Mary risked her life and ran away the next

morning. The guard did not shoot her and she escaped. When she arrived at the German town she knocked at the first door, which happened to be the home of the local priest. He gave her refuge and arranged for the Americans to take her to a displaced persons' camp. Later she obtained passage to Australia, where she lives to this day with her whole family.

Ten years ago, at the age of 80, Mary went back to Poland with her family, her son, her daughter and her grandchildren. She took them to Warsaw and then on to Auschwitz, where she immediately walked through the gates, into her dormitory, and found her old bed. She even recognised pictures of an SS officer who had beaten her.

They visited the old synagogue in Lublin at the same time as a group of British Jews, including Rabbi Mirvis, now Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue. Her grandson Jake, who turned 13 during the trip, was already prepared for his Bar Mitzvah on the family's return to Australia. He was granted the opportunity to read from the scroll and have an impromptu Bar Mitzvah under the supervision of Rabbi Mirvis. Several elderly Polish Jewish men present were visibly moved, and explained to Jake that he was the first young man to undergo a Bar Mitzvah in that synagogue since the Nazis had destroyed the community in the 1940's.

Mary married a Holocaust survivor, her husband Harry. Harry worked in Auschwitz unloading supplies from the trains, and occasionally stealing provisions to bribe guards for rations and food. He was also involved in plotting an inmates' revolt, Harry died in 2005.

Yesterday Mary's nephew Josh Frydenberg, a prominent Australian politician, joined the official commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. He represented his country amongst leaders and political figures from around the world. As well as marking his respects on behalf of his country, Josh also reflected on his family's experience within the camps.



Mary and her husband Harry

What can we learn from Mary's experience?

Mary was saved by three random acts of kindness. Three separate people, the SS officer running the laundry in Auschwitz, the medical officer who provided medicines, and the guard on the death march, all helped her to continue living. Each one of these people made a difference and helped her to survive the madness, bigotry, and terror which resulted in the death of millions of Jews and others, who the Nazis said had no right to live. Millions of innocent people who were less fortunate died. I think to prevent all those deaths many more people would have had to unite against tyranny and bigotry at an earlier stage. In many parts of the world today there are still examples of violence inspired by intolerance. I ask you today to reflect on this quotation, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil, is for good men to do nothing." And I ask you to remember the power of a random act of kindness.

In a moment of email serendipity, Clara's text arrived on the Lulav desk at the same time as a link to ["Stealth Altruism" in the Camps: Neglected Stories of Forbidden Care](#), an essay by sociologist Arthur Shostak. Stealth Altruism documents high-risk 'care sharing' in the camps, and provides an inspiring complement to Clara's presentation.

Tablets and Stones: Shabbat Mishpatim

D'var Torah for Erev Shabbat 13 February, 25 Sh'vat

Catherine Lyons

In the unrolling of the *Sefer Torah*, we have now reached the second half of Exodus; we are at chapters 21-24. *Mishpatim* deals with laws of property — animals and slaves — and with the consequences of aggression. It is tempting to gloss over all this, and move on to more quotable Torah: “You shall not oppress the stranger, for you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt”; “You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan”. And so it goes on: don’t charge interest when you make a loan to the poor. Return a cloak at night if you have taken it as security on a debt. But, interspersed in all this good stuff, we also find:

“Whoever makes a sacrifice to a god other than the Eternal One shall be utterly annihilated (put to death and have his property destroyed)”

“You shall not allow a witch [a practitioner of propitiatory magic] to stay alive.”

We can’t, with honesty, redact our reading according to modern norms. We have to deal with the whole text if we are to claim the Torah for justice. At the beginning of Chapter 24 the Eternal One summons Moses and tells him to bring Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, plus seventy more elders. And now begins what commentaries call ‘the ratification of the covenant’. The giving of the Ten Commandments is coming soon. As instructed, substantial sacrifices are made at the foot of the mountain. Reading the next part, I am stopped in my tracks.

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel; under his feet it was *as if* [there were] a construction of lapis lazuli bricks, like the essence of the sky for purity. Yet he did not raise his hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank. (24:9-11)

So: more than seventy of them go up the mountain, see God standing on a blue-tiled floor, and have a meal (the customary sealing of a deal in the Ancient Near East). Such a vivid and unexpected scene! The commentators abstract this away; the feet aren't real and nor is the brickwork: the seventy experience a divine vision. But those pure-as-the-sky lapis lazuli bricks give the story away.

Nearly a hundred years ago, a Syrian farmer found a collection of tablets on the Mediterranean coast, at Ras Shamra. They are now in the National Museum in Aleppo. The tablets are carved in an early Semitic alphabet (though it looks like cuneiform). They tell the story of Baal, he of the Canaanite pantheon, a favourite of the idolators and witches we read about at the beginning.

In the *Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, Baal, the Thunder god, has defeated his brother Yamm, the sea god. He wants a palace of gold, silver, and *pure lapis lazuli* on his mountain.

Baal lives in cloud on the top of a mountain. He casts down thunder bolts; his 'holy voice' makes the

כַּמְעֵשָׂה לְבִנַּת הַסְּפִיר וּכְעֵצִים הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטֹהַר



A Ugaritic tablet: this one bears the constitution of a sort of Canaanite chavurah
Photo: Zuckerman, West Semitic Research Project, USC

mountain quake; he subdues the sea. If this is uncomfortably familiar, it might describe why worshippers of Baal would be threatened with annihilation. And I start to understand how to deal with the text earlier in the *parashah* that we find so discomfiting.

As progressive Jews, we favour a universalist approach to language about God, and we take contemporary Biblical scholarship for granted. But how far does our universalism extend? We value a pluralist approach to contemporary diversity. But do we extend our acceptance across time? Progressive Christian theologians and New Testament scholars now recognise that the Gospel narratives tell a very Jewish story, not a story that is inimical to first-century rabbinic Judaism. They recognise that Jewish covenantal theology is every bit as valid as the Christian variety.

What might a progressive, universalist Jew concede to a polytheistic Bronze Age worshipper of Baal? At the risk of being taken for an idol worshipper, I think the least we can do is acknowledge our inheritance of vivid imagery and poetic form.

We included in our service this evening Psalm 93. When we read about the superiority of the Eternal One over the sea, we cannot ignore Baal the sky god, in his cloud palace on the mountain, triumphant over his sea-god brother Yamm.

Scholars take in their stride the comparative literature of the Ancient Near East. I think our congregational reading of the Tanakh would benefit from more mainstream recognition of that ancient context. When I read the brutal primitive parts of the Torah, I wonder how we will appear to our distant descendants. Among them, will only the scholars know under what social pressures and influences we lived? Please God they not judge us too harshly.

I thought I was going to leave it there. But there was a reason to mention that the Baal story is on tablets over 3000 years old, in the museum in Aleppo. Yesterday in the House of Commons, Robert Jenrick, MP, moved a debate on the Destruction of Historic Sites in Syria and Iraq.

ISIL, like the Taliban, declares any evidence of idol worship, even the evidence of a three millennia, to be *haram*. They destroy, ransom, or dig up and sell to fund terrorism, what remains of the lives of people who lived thousands of years before us.

By way of an epilogue, I leave you with a paragraph from Hansard.

ISIL and the Assad regime are employing contractors to seek out antiquities, working at times with couriers and agents for dealers. ISIL is deploying militants to ensure its control of sites and to supervise digging in a disturbing fashion that reminds us of blood diamonds in Africa in the '80s and '90s. It is also licensing looting with a formal tithe or tax of 20% on those who do the work themselves.

And Jenrick goes on to describe the contemporary looting and pillaging of Nineveh, just north of Mosul, by quoting the prophet Nahum, who also described the destruction of Nineveh:

“Take the spoil of the silver, take the spoil of the gold: for there is no end of the riches of all the precious furniture. She is destroyed, and rent, and torn: the heart melts, and the knees fail, and all the loins lose their strength.”

And all of this puts me in mind, albeit uncomfortably, of that first smasher of idols (according to both the Midrash and the Koran): he who started all of us on the long journey to ethical monotheism.

**Let the mountains bring you abundant silver,
The hills, the choicest gold.
Let the finest ore be brought to you.
And build the house of silver and gold,
The house of purest lapis lazuli.**

From the Ugaritic Baal Cycle

**Yet mightier than the roaring waves,
Mightier than the breaking seas,
You stand supreme on high.**

From Psalm 93

