

Occasional Address for the 87th Anniversary of the

Commemoration of Kristallnacht

The Night of Broken Glass

Council of Christians and Jews Western Australia

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I begin with an observation that is both shocking and obvious.

We commemorate this event in the shadow of what would have been unthinkable only a short time ago – the widespread outbreak of antisemitism in Australia, including perhaps most appallingly given the memory we turn our minds to today, the burning of synagogues, and in other countries including England, France and the United States – the murder of Jews in synagogues and Jewish institutions.

That antisemitism is broadly based, but it is primarily focused on the demonisation of a central and fundamental element of Jewish belief and identity – the connection with Judaism's historic homeland – the land of Israel.

That connection is more than the fundamental right of all peoples to self-determination. The ancient and unyielding yearning for Zion has for thousands of years remained at the core of Judaism's prayers, rituals, and historic mission. It is an intrinsic part of being Jewish. In its modern political manifestation, it is called Zionism. But that contemporary manifestation is simply a term for that which is indigenous and indispensable to being a Jew. Overwhelmingly, in contemporary terms, notwithstanding the wide gulf in views among Jews themselves about the conflict in the middle east, to be Jewish is to be a Zionist.

Yet, the term Zionist is now demonised and weaponised as a dirty word in mainstream and polite society – including here in Australia. It is much the same as the word Jew was soiled in the early twentieth century.

The Zionist is now something equally hideous – particularly and ironically among the classes of people who regard themselves as the most liberal and tolerant. The abhorrence for Zionism has become a necessary passport for entry into the enlightened class of society and an honoured badge of membership.

And, it may be observed, the dirty appellation of Zionist is far more convenient – precisely because it can be deployed together with the righteous pretence of condemning antisemitism. This is exactly what is done for example by the Greens and the political far left in this country and elsewhere, and now in the political mainstream in New York City.

Although all of that is a necessary preface, it is not what I wish to speak about.

First let us recall that Kristallnacht was an event that was both initiated and engineered by Nazi leadership, but which also inspired and was largely executed by a popular and organic outbreak of violent Jew hatred.

There is a prescient foretelling of that theme in the Bible itself.

The Bible's Book of Esther tells the story of the Jews of the Persian Empire following the brutal persecution and dispossession of the Jews and the destruction of their sovereign state in the land of Israel by the Babylonians in the 4th century BCE.

Let me remind you of a very brief overview of what occurred as recorded in the Book of Esther. King Achesverosh banished his Queen, Vashti, after she refused to appear at the king's lavish and intoxicating function. He sought a new queen by a beauty quest from among the maidens of his empire. A Jewish woman Hadassa or Esther in Persian was chosen. On the advice of her sagacious cousin Mordechai she did not disclose her Jewish identity.

In the meantime, a narcissistic man of great self-importance, Haman rose to prominence. All were required to bow in his presence. Mordechai, or as the text explicitly calls him – Mordechai HaYehudi – Mordecai the Jew – brazenly refused to bow before Haman. Haman was incensed and discovered that Mordechai was prominent member of a religious and ethnic minority that maintained a separate identity with its own beliefs, law and custom – the Jews. Haman persuaded the king that the Jews all needed to be annihilated. He called openly and unreservedly for what is properly and accurately called, genocide.

Haman did not see the need for military action or concentration camps. He had the king declare a day chosen by lottery as the day that all ordinary folk were to go out and slaughter the Jews. Like Kristallnacht and many other episodes of the Holocaust, it was to be a celebrated slaughter of the Jews; orchestrated by the leadership but executed by the ignition of widespread and organic popular Jew -hatred, aided and abetted by the authorities.

Then the tables turned. Esther disclosed her Jewish identity, told the king her people were imperilled and identified Haman as the genocidal master-mind. The king was now incensed. He had Haman and his cronies hanged.

The Jews rejoiced.

That's where most people's knowledge of the story ends. But the further detail of the story is critical.

The problem for Esther and the Jews was not solved by the hanging of Haman and his followers. There was still the law proclaiming the popular genocide of the Jews to be carried out by the people throughout the vast empire. In a perversely amusing parody of the law, it was unconstitutional for the king to revoke the decree. People would still therefore be able to participate in the popular genocide.

The best the king could do was to pass a further law giving Jews the right to defend themselves against the genocidal attackers; a right they had hitherto, been denied.

Chapter 9 of the Book of Esther sets the scene and tells the story as the appointed national kill-the-Jews day arrived.

Nikhalu hayehudim b'areihem

The Jews assembled in their cities

lishlo'ach yad

to raise their hand

bimvakshei ra'atam:

against those who desired to do them evil.

The fight was on.

Chapter 9 records a resounding victory for the Jews against their enemies. The text says that in this battle 75,000 enemies of the Jews were killed. Whether that rounded number is exaggerated to accentuate the theme of reversal of fortune as was not uncommon in ancient texts, is open to conjecture.

What is plain though, is that there was a popular outbreak of brutal violence to kill Jews, expressly permitted and indeed legislated by the authorities. Jews were finally graced with permission to defend themselves. They did so and succeeded. Many Jew-hating Persians were killed in the violent clashes.

Many here will know that Jews celebrate that occasion with the carnival festival of Purim. There are four essential religious observances for the Purim festival: first is the public recital of the Book of Esther. The recital in the synagogue is a fun-filled, boisterous and most indecorous affair. Everyone comes in fancy dress and the name of Haman is met with a loud noise competition – the more inventive and hilarious the noise, the better. The second is a feast

which includes the traditional delicacy of three-cornered pastries called, strangely, Haman's ears. The final two observances are the exchange of gifts to create goodwill between members of the community, and charity to the poor.

Jews are so accustomed to growing up with the festival of Purim they generally do not appreciate how bizarre it is and what it tells us about the most enduring response to Jew hatred and violent antisemitism.

Purim commemorates an event of a terrifying threatened violent and complete genocide of the Jews. But there is no anger, there is no outrage, there are no speeches about antisemitism or calls for violence or revenge. Purim is a wild and happy day - a celebration of Jewish survival and a celebration of commitment to Jewish life.

The Book of Esther teaches us that when genocidal violence is threatened or perpetrated against Jews – there is only one option – fight back in self-defence. And the festival of Purim teaches us that ultimately the most enduring and authentically Jewish response to antisemitism is the celebration of life and commitment to Jewish values such as communal goodwill, friendship and charity.

That is not to say that the Jewish calendar does not have its days of deep sadness for the horrors of Jewish history, including the Holocaust and now the 2023 Simchat Torah massacre known more widely as the 7th of October which was perpetrated on the most joyous of Jewish holy days – Simchat Torah – which means the joy of the Torah. But those sad days are confined to their appointed times. They are days of reflection, sorrow, tears and usually fasting. They are not days of anger, outrage or revenge.

It is admittedly, for me and I suspect for many others, too difficult to eschew the outrage of the Holocaust and the Simchat Torah massacre or indeed the outrage of what has happened in my own country. I confess to not being able to move beyond the anger and to make do merely with heartbreak and tears.

But I do know that ultimately Judaism has survived because it parks the tears and heartbreak into confined periods of the calendar. It does not ritualise anger and revenge. It finds repugnant the sentiment behind slogans such as globalise the intifada. And Judaism commands its adherents, always, to celebrate life and to commit to its values.

I am nevertheless compelled to confront, another outrage of our era. Having suffered an unapologetically declared genocidal attack on Simchat Torah 2023 with the proud promise of

more Jew killing whenever the opportunity arose, the Jewish State did what it must – it fought back to repel the attack and to remove the enduring threat of the promised further genocidal attacks.

And who now stands accused of genocide with a global tsunami of shallow sloganeering? And that, without the slightest regard to the actual meaning of genocide or the assessment of the circumstances required by what is in fact a legal construct.

But in a dark echo of a previous era, it does not stop at the charge of genocide. The Zionist is the manifestation of the world's social ills. Take the public exclamation of the recently elected mayor of NYC – “if an NYPD boot is on your neck, it's been laced by the IDF”. We know the evil that an American police boot on the neck is intended to symbolize. The imagery is as explicit as it is inescapable. The Zionist, the Jew is again the killer, the polluter of human goodness. Salvation for the world's problems again requires the world to be rid of the Zionists, the Jews.

I am generally not an alarmist. I am not afraid for my own safety in this country. I do not believe the government has turned or will turn against the Jews of Australia. But I am deeply worried that the insidious and pervasive demonisation of a central plank of Jewish identity is turning the Jew, again, into a global pariah.

Kristallnacht is an occasion that ought to give pause to reflect on that grotesque prospect.

You may think I am overstating the position and there is simply much chaos emanating from a noisy, largely immature minority. Thinking people recoil from such assertions.

And that takes me back to the Book of Esther.

It has now become in vogue among scholars and others to revisit chapter 9 of the book of Esther and to fashion the Persians as the victims and the Jews as the genocidal killers. After all, the Jews ended up as the powerful ones and killed tens of thousands of apparently innocent Persians. And predictably enough it is now claimed that Israel's genocide in Gaza was religiously inspired by the biblical text of the Jews' genocidal slaughter of innocent Persian civilians and the contemporary observance of the festival of Purim.

Lest you suspect I am inventing this, I invite your attention to a very recent work of a celebrated South African professor, Sarojini Nadar who holds the Desmond Tutu Research Chair in Religion and Social Justice at the University of the Western Cape.

Professor Nadar completed her PhD studying instances of sexual violence in biblical texts with a particular focus on the Book of Esther and the coercive exploitation of the harem of virgins, and Esther in particular.

Professor Nadar has more recently had an awakening which has inspired her latest book published by Routledge. Chapter 9 of the Book of Esther is the inspiration of Israel's genocide in Gaza. The Jews are at it again.

Professor Nadar writes of the closing chapters of Esther where, she points out the Jews of Persia annihilate their enemies through ethnic and colonial violence. In her preface Professor Nadar writes 'in the current genocidal war against Gaza these sacred justifications have been drawn on once again. The Palestinian people, like the Persians in Esther's story are constructed as the enemy of the chosen people – and like the Amalekite people, they are an enemy whose destruction is not only permissible but required'

In the first chapter, Professor Nadar writes that the "disproportionate retribution against Haman, his sons and 75,000 – in quotation marks – "enemies" in Esther weighs heavily in light of Gaza's death toll, realistically estimated at over 186,000 by mid-2024."

I pause to observe that even the death toll promulgated by the Hamas terrorist organisation in mid-2025 was less than half of that.

But, you ask:

if Professor Nadar is a scholar specialising in sexual violence, what does she say about the sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas terrorists on Simchat Torah of 2023?

Well, this is what she says:

"While sexual violence in conflict must be condemned unequivocally, these allegations – often exaggerated, unfounded or selectively highlighted – contribute to the broader dehumanisation of Palestinians, offering yet another layer of legitimacy for their annihilation."

In other words, the clear evidence of sexual violence perpetrated against Jews is to be dismissed as a propaganda tool in the Jews' genocide against the gentile population of Gaza inspired by Jewish religious texts.

But what of the way Jews celebrate Purim today? Well, as a true scholar, that is not to be overlooked. Professor Nadar writes that in the synagogue megila reading, the performance-

focused approach emphasises the story's emotional resonance over its textual complexities, prioritising the experience of the narrative as it is heard and felt by the congregation.

In less academic terms: the way Jews observe Purim today in their synagogues inspires them emotionally to justify and perpetrate genocidal massacre of innocent gentiles.

And most importantly Professor Nadar has included a section headed – Disclaimer: anti-colonial, not antisemitic in which she condemns any suggestion that she is antisemitic.

Time does not allow for a comprehensive critique of this new guise of ancient theological antisemitism. For today's purposes, the passages I have quoted, speak for themselves.

It is more important to return to the true and authentic message of Purim and the Book of Esther: to respond to antisemitism with a redoubled commitment to the celebration of life, and Jewish values of good will and harmony within our communities.

In that vein I conclude with an extraordinary experience I have had in the last two days in Sydney.

Omer Shemtov was a secular 21-year-old Israeli young man who on Simchat Torah 2023 was at the Nova music festival. He was kidnapped by the Hamas terrorists and taken to the tunnels of Gaza where he remained for 505 days until his release in February 2025 – many of them in solitary confinement in complete darkness. He was literally starved and enslaved.

Last Friday night I had the enormous privilege of having Shabbat dinner with Omer and his mother Shelley at my son's home in Sydney.

It is impossible to describe how that young man embodies the authentic Jewish response to antisemitism. He not only found faith in G-d, he speaks softly of life, of love for creation, love for family and love for the world. I heard him again at a public function at the end of the Sabbath on Saturday night. He implored the huge audience to appreciate the gift of life, the love of family and friends and the commitment of the Jewish people, to its heritage and its mission.

In the face of the barbaric antisemitism which he endured, and the growing antisemitism which confronts our world and this nation, young Omer, now 23, concluded with these enduring words, with which I too conclude:

Am Yisrael Chai