

**Keynote speech delivered at the WWI “Lights Out” memorial service
at Bevis Marks, 9th Ab, 5774**

100 years ago, on 28th June, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife Sophie, Duchess of Hoenberg, were assassinated in Sarajevo. The assassination of the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire triggered the bloodiest and deadliest war that Europe had seen in centuries. It was called "the Great War". It was said that it would be "the war to end all wars", and although it did not fulfil its promise to do so, World War One transformed us, and thrust us into a new world. Empires were undone and prominent world leaders collapsed under its great pressures. It is said that King George V aged almost over night after touring the Western Front of what he called, "that horrible and unnecessary war." World War One was not only the great disaster of the 20th century, it also set into motion many other disasters that would follow in its wake, the greatest of which, was World War Two. As we look back, It is hard to believe that one event could cause such an ending of worlds.

It is ironic that both the War's beginning and its 100 year commemoration, fall on the eve of the most mournful day of the Jewish calendar, this day, the 9th of Av. The 9th of Av marks the anniversary of the greatest disaster of the Jewish nation, the destruction of our Bet Mikdash, our Holy Temple in Jerusalem, and the expulsion of our people from our homeland. It is ironic because this great catastrophe also began as a result of an assassination -- a character assassination -- when an undesirable dinner guest was publicly insulted by his host at a Jerusalem dinner party. Of course, it is never the local event alone that causes such epic devastation. The danger brews just beneath the surface for days, months, and years until one event triggers its eruption. As historian William Durant wrote: "Barbarism, like the jungle, does not die out, but only retreats behind the barriers that civilisation has thrown up against it, and waits there always to reclaim that to which civilisation has temporarily laid claim."

After our exile, our people lived as citizens in nations all over the world for 2,000 years. During that time we suffered all manner of barbarism and persecution. We were expelled from country to country, and we became known as the "wandering Jews". But in all of our sojourns we lent our hands to aid and build our host countries to the best of our abilities. We fought in their armies and, tragically, as a poignant aftermath of our own

national destruction, we found ourselves as soldiers in the Great War. Jew fought against Jew as our respective countries were plunged into combat.

Indeed, members of this synagogue, Bevis Marks, fought for King and country with service and sacrifice of exemplary commitment and citizenship. Among them was Captain Robert Sebag Montefiore, grandson of one of the great heads of our community, Sir Joseph Sebag Montefiore. Robert died of wounds sustained in action at Gallipoli in November 1915. Lieutenant Frank Alexander de Pass was awarded the Victoria Cross, the first Jew to gain the distinction. It was awarded posthumously, because the act that earned it cost him his life. Another hero that the Spanish and Portuguese community gave to England was Lieutenant Solomon Benzecry, who was killed on 19 March, 1918 at the battle of Bournal Woods. These men never returned home. They were not yet of the age that they could follow in the footsteps of their fathers and give service to their community. Tablets now hang prominently here at Bevis marks and at Lauderdale Road that contain the 38 names of those sons of the congregation who gave their lives for this country. The number of total casualties is not precise, but they are said to be around 11 million dead and 20 million wounded. The numbers are staggering. It was a war that broke a century.

Reflecting again on the coinciding of the anniversary of the Great War with the 9th of Av, we realise that this mournful day for the Jewish people has also been the signpost in our history that has kept us buoyant as a nation, and has helped us maintain our hope for peace and security. Tisha Be'Av brings us to terms with our breakdowns and prompts us to learn from loss. For as we drape our holy ark in black, and wear unlaundered clothes and shoes of fabric, and as we keep from eating and drinking, barely greeting one another in our grief — Year after year, decade after decade, century after century — we recognise that our capacity for survival was born in our tragedy. We have learned that as we face loss and collapse, we have two choices: we can either recover, literally cover up what happened, or we can look into the grim eye of tragedy and learn its lessons. When we do so, we sanctify the loss of life and ensure that it was not in vain.

After our exile, we committed to survive as we traversed the desert of the nations of the world, and we learned to embrace change. These were not, as they are not now, easy lessons to learn. But this day is a day set aside to contemplate them.

World War One shattered old paradigms, and left us bewildered and reeling from the aftermath. Today we live in the world that was shaped in its fiery crucible. Aviation, industrialisation, the movements for civil rights and women's equal rights, were all put into motion by World War One. The Great War yielded great change.

But we were slow in learning its valuable lessons. While we could have learned from the causes and dangerous mistakes that led to, and perpetuated World War One, we instead missed the opportunities to forge peace, and use our advances in technology for the enhancement of humanity. Instead, we repeated in great measure the same missteps that led to catastrophe.

There are two lessons that, with a century of perspective, we might learn from the Great War that can help promote peace and prevent the devastating loss of life that war brings.

The first, is not to disregard and underestimate the impact of local acts. The assassination of an Austrian archduke dragged 30 countries into war, mobilised 65 million soldiers, caused the deaths of 11 million combatants and 5 million civilians, and left 21 million wounded.

The public affront of Bar Kamtsa, a ruthless Jewish turncoat, exiled the Jewish nation from its homeland and brought every manner of death and suffering to its people over the course of 20 centuries.

I know that I am not alone in seeing the anti-Israel/anti-Jewish demonstrations occurring around the world, and being concerned that they are not minor events, and that the tides of their undercurrents are rising. We must treat them with all seriousness.

The second, is the lesson that extremism is never a force that brings peace and stability. The extremism and vengeance expressed at the Treaty of Versailles in the punitive terms set against Germany, caused anger and resentment to the German people. Adolph Hitler channeled that resentment into German nationalism and Naziism. They nursed this into the 20's and 30's, and the anger that came from the treaty helped to provoke what it was meant to prevent: the start of World War Two.

As we watch extremism around the world today hit epic levels, we must realise that the aftermath can be horribly devastating. While World War One did not live up to its claim to end all wars, it presented us with golden lessons that we cannot afford to overlook.

May the time that we take to remember, as we do tonight, also serve as a time for reflection and growth. And may our awareness, care, and dedication to peace and prosperity of all mankind prevail. May G-d bless us all and banish the darkness with light.