

TRIBUTE TO CHAIM BERMANT ON HIS 25TH YAHRZEIT COMMEMORATION

Edgware Shul, 17th January 2023

It is a great privilege to have been invited by the family to say a few words this evening on the theme of Chaim's Jewish values. And the mere fact that one can highlight such a dimension of his outlook and emotion is more than significant. For the nouns 'journalist' and 'religious values' are rarely found in apposition, and, indeed, in the popular imagination are considered an oxymoron!

Not so in Chaim's case. He was a man of integrity, with a moral conscience rooted in his unwavering commitment to the teachings and principles of the Judaism he studied, researched, loved, and lived by. Those were the values that underscored everything he wrote as a columnist, and the blatant flouting of which, within our Jewish community and in Israeli politics, he regarded as his mission to expose.

His religious identity was forged by his parents, and especially by his father, Rabbi Azriel Bermant, a rabbi of two communities in Latvia and a Talmudic scholar. When the family moved to Glasgow, Chaim entered the city's yeshivah. Having myself served as a rabbi for 10 years in Glasgow, I had the privilege of knowing his distinguished Rosh Yeshivah, Rav Naftali Shapiro, a disciple of the Chafetz Chayim, so I know that the standards of the yeshivah were high and that it enjoyed a fine reputation. And Chaim maintained that love of learning and absorption in our classical

texts throughout his life and sought to communicate their glory and profundity to his friends, and especially to his fellow members of the Hampstead Garden Suburb Synagogue, wherein he established what was known as ‘the shiur Group.’ It attracted people to study, to listen to distinguished speakers, and to participate in high level discussion of the week’s sidrah.

His co-organisers were the late, and much missed, Dr Michael Weitzman and Dr Joseph Jacobs, brother of Chief Rabbi Jakobovits, all of blessed memory. Chaim sought to encourage its members to think outside the box and offer their own insights, as well as to discuss the views of modern scholars and commentators, even those outside the traditional orbit. That was in the era before the Hertz chumash became anathema in so many Orthodox circles on account of its inclusion of comments by non-Orthodox and non-Jewish scholars. The irony would certainly not have been lost on Chaim that that chumash was one of the only commentaries of its day to vigorously, courageously and academically rebut every argument of those who rejected the doctrine of *Torah min hashamayim*, the divine origin of the Torah.

Back to the Glasgow Yeshivah. Part of the curriculum of the yeshivah was musar, moral and ethical character development, a subject that, to my mind, would benefit Rishi Sunak’s school pupils far more than the imposition of any extra dose of mathematics. I have no doubt that it was the exposure to, and the internalising of, such elevated and character-enhancing ideas while sitting at the

feet of his pious teachers at an impressionable age, that prompted the young Chaim to become a doughty warrior throughout his life, against hypocrisy, false piety, pomposity, and fanaticism.

Many would have regarded him as an enigma, given that he managed somehow to synthesize a mind-set of tolerance, flexibility, and liberality, with a passionate commitment to Orthodox Judaism and its way-of-life.

Chaim was an authentic Hillelite and he inveighed against what he regarded as the unnecessary stringencies that many Orthodox leaders seemed to promote as a veritable halachic philosophy. This explains an oft-repeated comment of his - especially controversial given his rabbinic pedigree – namely, ‘‘I believe in Judaism, but not in rabbis,’’ as quoted by Gerald Jacobs in his excellent appreciation of Chaim in last Friday’s JC, and by Danny just now. However, I submit that this was a tongue-in-cheek, throw-away remark, given his close relationship with several rabbis – myself definitely included – and the fact that his penultimate publication was a biography of the rabbis’ rabbi, Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits *ztz”l*. This speaks volumes both for Chaim’s objectivity, on the one hand, and for the Rav’s unique qualities as he perceived them, on the other.

It is not an exaggeration to say that, with his vast, bushy beard, bright eyes, joie de vivre, and vigorous participation in any conversation within earshot, he not only resembled the standard

image of a classical prophet, but, in many ways, he spoke and wrote with the force and eloquence of members of that fraternity.

For it is common to describe our biblical prophets as ‘forth-tellers’ rather than ‘foretellers.’ That is to say that they regarded themselves as called not to foretell the future, but to be forthright in exposing publicly the moral, ethical, and spiritual shortcomings of their community as well as the character flaws of individuals, especially those who occupied positions of leadership and authority.

And – if you’ll forgive a rabbi resorting to homiletics – I would say that, given that the prophets generally commenced their pleas for justice and ethical living with the words ***Koh** amar Hashem*, ‘***Thus** says the Lord,*’ and that the gematria, the Hebrew numerical value, of the word ***Koh*** – kaf and hey - is 25, I view it as singularly appropriate that the family should have chosen to mark the forth-teller par excellence, Chaim’s, 25th Yahrzeit with this special commemoration.

For Chaim was indubitably a forth-teller, a journalist, columnist, essayist and novelist who didn’t flinch from telling things as they were, and who could burst an inflated ego with a mere turn of phrase, a dash of irony, and a witty riposte. Many who unworthily posed as belonging to the circles of the great and the good were pulled down from their pedestal either by Chaim’s subtle criticisms or his sharply-honed verbal arrows. Significantly, the fact that

Hebrew employs the identical root *davar* for both ‘a word’ and *devorah*, ‘a bee’ indicates its recognition of the powerful sting inherent in a well-chosen word or pointed critique.

I wish to conclude with perhaps the most conspicuous example of Chaim’s intellectual honesty and uncompromising objectivity which was to draw a sharp distinction between the Orthodox Judaism whose ethical and moral principles he greatly admired in their original setting – that is, when codified in its sources - but which, in his view, did not translate into policy or action by too many of its self-proclaimed custodians and exponents, especially in the State of Israel. In his words, Judaism is wholesome and benign so long as it is distant from power in Israel. He also found it hard to reconcile the fact that those who claimed to speak in Judaism’s name were often hostile to secular Jews or to those who didn’t embrace their particular brand of Judaism or lifestyle.

Against the backcloth of medieval Christianity’s barbarism, he observed that it became a moral force only when it ceased to be a political one, and – like the prophets of old, *lehavdil* - that the power of the Pope lay precisely in the fact that he had no power, but considerable influence. And, for the same reasons, he fearlessly took the then Prince Charles to task for his expression of a blanket admiration of Islam.

Hence my depiction of Chaim as having been in the true mould of the forth-telling prophets. And, because his weekly JC columns

addressed pressing national, international, communal, and religious issues, his was the very first page that many admitted to opening. As a rabbi, I can reveal that many colleagues of my day culled his themes and ideas on a regular basis, and to powerful effect, as the basis for their Shabbat sermons, and gained much from his weekly master-class in the art of essay writing.

So, we fondly recall this evening a writer of acclaimed literary talent, a man of great moral stature, a thinker and commentator possessed of great wit and perception, and a learned and observant Jew who exposed and bemoaned the disparity between religious theory and practice. A man who – to paraphrase Kohelet 9:9 – ‘enjoyed life with the wife whom he loved, all the days of his life’ - with Judy - and derived great pride and nachat from his children, Azi and Zoe, Danny and Miriam, Aliza and Amir, and Evie *aleha ha-shalom*, and from their grandchildren and all their family.

We wish you all *arichat yamim* on this 25th yahrzeit, and continued pride in the legacy, the values, and the *shem tov* he has bequeathed to you all, and in the knowledge that he was not only irrepressible, but also irreplaceable, and continues to be missed by so many in our community and beyond after all these years. *Yehi zichro baruch* - May his memory be a blessing. Amen.