

21 October 2007

BERESHIT 5767

Exactly 100 years ago, in 1906, Captain Albert Dreyfus was finally cleared of the stain on his character and all the charges against him. What was the story? Well, 12 years before in 1894 Dreyfus a captain in the French army was accused of being a German spy. That there was a spy there was no doubt: but why had suspicion fallen on Dreyfus? Well Dreyfus was a Jew. He was tried and condemned and the affair unleashed a storm of anti-Jewish feeling in France which went on for years. This was France where Jews were supposed to live in Freedom. In French revolution, the cry had gone out "Liberty Equality Fraternity" Napoleon had summoned a Sanhedrin, the first since ancient times, a kind of Parliament of Jews from across France. Only in France, it was said, were citizens just that - citizens equal under the law. Jews were respected members of society now - or were they?

In the light of twentieth century history we now know that prejudice and discrimination against Jews can break out anywhere at any time. But to the European Jews of the 1890s the Dreyfus affair came a huge shock. Theodore Herzl was appalled. He had been covering the Dreyfus affair as a journalist. He had seen mass rallies in Paris shouting "Death to the Jews!" In June 1895 he wrote in his diary of the futility of trying to combat anti-Semitism. The following year he brought out his book "The Jewish state" and in 1897 organised the first Zionist congress.

But others had different reactions. There was for example the French academic David Emile Durkheim. His father was a rabbi and named him David, but when he grew up he used his middle name Emile because it felt less Jewish. He became one of the founders of modern anthropology and sociology with his work on the division of labour, his study of suicide rates, and defence of the importance of religion in society. The Dreyfus affair shook him, as it did every French Jew. He was involved in writing letters and making speeches on Dreyfus' behalf. But for Durkheim anti-Semitism was an aberration which would pass. It did not change his basic view that French society would in the end be able to shake it off. Herzl and Durkheim – were two Jewish attitudes to the modern world.

It is amazing to think that Durkheim and the two other founders of European social theory, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud all came from Jewish families. Marx was baptised a Christian, Freud remained a Jew. But both wrote about the problems of being Jewish in their time.

For this was the era when every Jew came face to face with modernity How should Jews live, now they were free at last from the enslavement of the ghetto?

There were many new ways of being a Jewish. Becoming a Zionist was one way; becoming integrated into a secular Diaspora society was another. Reform Judaism offered a third, drawing on the new Wissenschaft des Judentums the scientific study of Judaism developed in Germany. From the thinkers of those days comes a direct line through the generations to the kind of Judaism we practice at Kol Chai today.

But is it right for our time? Is it right for the future? Are the issues we face the same?

On the one hand we appear to live in a multi-cultural multi-faith society where we are free to do what we like, but on the other hand we see that religious issues and prejudice against our and other religions is in the papers every day. How should we respond to the claims and problems of our own modernity?

The creation story in the Book of Genesis can be reconciled, in part at least, with scientific view of the world. Our Chazan Bereshit, David Goldman pointed out to us last Shabbat that the fishes were made before the humans. Life began in the waters. The creation story has been the subject of much Jewish speculation over the ages. In the mystical tradition the question was how could a God who was pure spiritual essence make a material world at all, and how could we, made of flesh and blood, reach God? The modern world had completely different problems with it, the six days and the lack of dinosaurs. Joining the modern world didn't just change the answers for Jews; it changed all the questions as well.

Starting on Tuesday evening we have an opportunity to explore in more detail what happened when Jews became free citizens and Judaism came face to face with modernity. Do we need to make compromises to keep the old traditions relevant? Come and find out what our thinkers have said, and explore what if anything we can continue to believe in a world which seems to be becoming ever more divided and more dangerous.

The stories of the creation and Adam and Eve help, as the English writer John Milton put it "to justify the ways of God to men" - to help explain the purpose of life, the problems of life and the difficulties of life. At the centre of the story, and at the centre of the garden stood the tree of life. What was this tree? According to many rabbis, it was simply an olive tree, but in the story it was we are told a tree from which if you eat the fruit you would live for ever. The story was written to explain why God did not give us the gift of living for ever. But in Judaism it has come to mean something else - the gift of Torah. Through Torah we do live forever, on a spiritual level because we gain our reward and on a practical level because the knowledge of it descends through the generations, creating a different kind of tree of life, a kind of multi-family tree which goes on forever in the sense that the tradition carries on. As the book of Proverbs says, those who hold fast to it are happy indeed.

Rabbi Dr Michael Hilton