

REMEMBER AMALEK

We have been here before. We know what it's like to hear about members of our own faith murdered at prayer, to imagine who they are, what it must have been like. It has only been a few months since shul-goers were murdered at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Yesterday, after waking up to hear that 49 people had been killed at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, I contacted members of two of our local mosques to express condolences and ask if there was anything I could do.

Miqdaad, who came to speak to us at our interfaith service, said: "The fact that it was just two ordinary mosques, on a standard Friday for the Friday prayer....makes it very real." The police stepped up their presence outside all mosques yesterday, so that Miqdaad in North Harrow and Salim who worships at Stanmore mosque, for the moment anyway, said they felt safe.

There is a dark undertow to this time of year. On Wednesday, we celebrate the carnival of Purim, when the Jews are threatened with death, and by turning the tables, end up killing their attackers instead. It's a fun festival, but there's anger behind the laughter. It is a bit of a revenge fantasy. And I think a bit of anger is OK – I'm angry. I'm angry at the rise of the far right and terrorists who think they can go into synagogues and mosques and kill people at prayer. I'm angry

that our services need to be protected by the police. I think we should be angry. I think we should channel that anger into acts of interfaith solidarity, love, support and education – but the emotion is still there.

The Shabbat before a festival often takes on the character of that festival, so this should be a jolly Shabbat with dressing up and a bit of schnapps. But in fact this Shabbat is called Shabbat Zachor, Shabbat of Remembrance, and what we are being asked to remember, in our maftir, is also the stuff of darkness.

We are told to remember Amalek – the tribe who became our archetypal mythic enemy. Amalek surprised us on our march through the desert when we were hungry and tired and cut down the stragglers at the back – the weak, the old, the very young. So when we are safe and comfortable, we are told to blot out the memory of Amalek – AND not to forget. That's a bit contradictory – not to forget AND to blot out the memory. We know that Jews are very good at remembering – but why is it so important both to remember and to forget at the same time? What does it mean?

Well there are two ways of thinking about Amalek. One is as the literal enemy of the Jews – the one who always hates us in every generation. Haman, Hitler, Hamas. There is of course a truth in that. At Pesach we say - for not just one enemy has stood against us to

wipe us out but in every generation there have been those who have stood against us to destroy us, but God keeps on saving us.

But there is another way of looking at it. The Chasidic perspective on Amalek is that the tribe of Amalek assimilated, no more Kingdom of Amalek, and that a little bit of Amalek entered everyone. So we all carry a bit of Amalek inside us, the potential to hate others and to use our power, when we have it, to attack the vulnerable. Our task is to acknowledge this murderous impulse because if we just repress it, it will rise up in unhealthy ways, but at the same time to blot it out and stop it actually making us hurt anyone.

We all have Amalek within us – and Jews are not always the victims.

It's been 25 years since Baruch Goldstein, a follower of the racist and murderous Meir Kahane, murdered 29 Muslims at prayer in the Tomb of Abraham, our shared Father. The murderer chose Purim quite deliberately and now, in the run-up to the Israeli elections, the Israeli Prime Minister, Bibi Netanyahu, has forged an alliance with the extremist party Otzma Yehudit, Jewish Power, which describes itself as the successor the banned Kahanist movement, and which advocates the forced removal of Palestinians from Israel.

It is thought that Baruch Goldstein identified the Palestinians as Amalek. We are told to blot Amalek out and that's what he was trying to do when he murdered 29 innocent people. He did not

notice the Amalek within himself. His graveside is now a place of pilgrimage for right-wing extremists.

Many of us choose to carry the trauma of Amalek and cling to fear of the other – it's a legitimate and familiar trope. We still remember the Shoah, when we were completely powerless, and ruthlessly persecuted. We are anxious about relatives in Israel, in a week when there have been missile attacks in Tel Aviv and bombing in Gaza in response. But we are told to remember Amalek in order to blot out his memory, not to copy his behaviour.

It is so important, particularly at this time of year, as the world begins to open up to spring and summer, to breathe deeply, to honour the pain of the past, but to move beyond towards the healing of all wounds.

We can, and we need to be able to look other communities in the eye, to know that we have more in common with our Muslim neighbours than we have things that separate us, and remember that all minorities in all cultures get attacked for being different and unique.

On this Shabbat Zachor, this Shabbat of Remembrance, let's remember to stand together against our real enemies – the fear that leads to bloodshed, the xenophobia that desecrates and destroys. Let's remember not just that we have enemies but also that as

people, we are united in courage to keep caring, to resist tyranny and to remember our core humanity. Let's fear a little less, love a little more, rise above our own pain and sow the seeds of hope that will reach across the world, to New Zealand and back again. Ken Yehi Ratzon.