

Tower Hamlets Holocaust Memorial Day Talk

25/1/26

My grandfather, Papa Henry, of blessed memory, was a British Jew. He was born here, he served this country in the British army. He died here. He was not in Nazi Europe; he was, relatively, comparatively, safe during those terrible years. And yet, he lived with guilt for much of his life: it could have been him. As a teenager I mocked him for his obsession with the Holocaust. And now, I am closer to understanding: barely a day goes by - particularly in this time since the 7th October - when I do not have a moment when I shudder in fear and the Holocaust comes my mind.

My research at the Leo Baeck Institute includes looking at the history of post-Holocaust Jewish

theology here in the UK in the years immediately after the Holocaust.

Last Tuesday I had a solid day in the library, I read a lot, I wrote a good amount amount: I thought to myself: well done, let's give you a break from thinking about the Holocaust, a reward for good work, let's take you to the cinema! I went to the cinema.

The first film I saw listed was the documentary film *The Voice of Hind Rajab*. I read about it and feel frightened. I do not have the courage to see it. I know of the importance of bearing witness to human suffering but I am scared of what it might do to me, to my the story of the suffering of the Jewish people I learnt from Papa Henry, it might be too much for me, too contradictory, too painful.

Is there something wrong with me, that I do not feel that my heart cannot extend to this particular suffering? No, I reassure myself, it's just that I am a human. I am limited, I am 'finite'.

So instead, I go to see *Marty Supreme* - the new Timothée Chalamet film about table tennis. What could go wrong?

Marty dreams of being an international ping pong superstar.

He says of a match against the defending champion Bela Kletzki: I'll finish off what Hitler could not.

And then Marty says:

I'm Jewish too. I'm Hitler's worst nightmare.
Because I am alive.

Oy. Really? I thought I was coming to see a
film about table tennis, oh no, there is no
escape from the Holocaust!

There is no escape: Marty runs, fast, he has to
win. He'll do anything to win - physical,
mental, criminal - anything to win the game. It
is as though if he does not win, something
terrible might happen.

There is no escape: Bela Kletzki, the table
tennis champion who Marty plays against, is
based on the real person Polish-Jewish table
tennis champion and Holocaust survivor Alex
Ehrlich, who was deported to Auschwitz, he was
spared from the gas chambers because he was

recognised by a Nazi guard as a table tennis champion. The Nazis gave him the job of going into the forest, where only he would be harmed, when he did his job of diffusing live bombs. With each bomb Kletzki looks his possible death in the face.

Towards the end of the film another character says to Marty:

'You go out and win that game, you're gonna be here forever too. And you'll never be happy. You will never be happy.'

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The father of a friend died. I visited the shiva house, the house of mourning. I sat with her and her family. I listened to her stories about her dad.

*

Marty plays table tennis to win; Marty's table tennis is a 'finite' game. It has an end moment. It will always have a winner. It is played for that winner. It has distinct rules.

It is different to an 'infinite' game, the game that is life itself, that never ends that will always open to the new.

Death, mortality, is the very essence of the 'finite'. After someone dies we come face to face with the 'final', 'finitude', death.

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I sat beside my friend in that shiva house, in that house of mourning. I became aware that the visitors, the comforters, were, gently, softly, lovingly, part of the process of mourning. They are bereaved; they have been close to 'finitude'; we bring them, gently, softly, lovingly, the simplicity of our presence; our faces, are a sign which says: the world continues, there is still 'infinity'; we come to show you, gently, softly, lovingly, we come from the world, we show you that it goes on.

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But Marty is running too fast, he is trying too hard to win, he has to *prove* that he is Hitler's nightmare, he has to win; Marty plays table tennis to win; Marty is stuck in a 'finite' game.

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The Holocaust was unprecedented, unique, in the extent, the scale, of its radical evil. The world after Auschwitz, is a different world.

Was Papa Henry ever able to 'mourn' the Holocaust? It was too big, too total, too close. Can faces, signs of the 'infinite' ever meet a 'finitude' of that scale? Will Marty ever be able to stop running? Will Marty be able to mourn?

The Holocaust was modern: the use of technology, of the systems of industry, of entrepreneurial innovation, of modern economics used to carry out an atrocity. Modern, like Hiroshima, carpet bombing, the military

industrial complex: a system that renders the
'infinite' sign into the 'finite' number.

Can we mourn for the atrocities perpetrated
with industrial level modern technology? I do
not know.

Modern technology in 2026: AI, social media
information generation bots - the modern
technological planting of 'finite' ideas,
truths, thoughts into us humans who were once
'infinite'.

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The film portrays Bela Kletzky, dressed in his
concentration camp pyjamas, in the forest. He
diffuses a bomb. He hears the buzz of a bee. He
lifts up his eyes and he follows the bee. He

finds a bee hive. He lights a match. He smokes out the bees. He grasps the honey comb. He smears the honey on himself. He returns to the barracks. He offers the honey to his fellow inmates. He saves their lives.

At the end of the film, Marty, stops running. Marty is greeted by 'infinity'.

It's good to see your faces. Thank you for bringing your sign of 'infinity' to this day that remembers how precious, how precarious, how vulnerable is the sign of the 'infinite'.

You bring me your sign of 'infinity', in some way, that I do not know how to speak of, in some way, I maybe I can bring that sign to my Papa Henry of blessed memory.

You bring me your sign of 'infinity', and maybe, maybe it will give me the strength that I might allow my heart to expand, and for me to be a witness to the unbearable suffering of others. Maybe, I'll have the courage to see the film *The Voice of Hind Rajab*. But I do not know, I feel my 'finitude', I am only a person, I am limited.

But, as I write this talk, I notice the 'infinite' possibilities of my mind.

I was inspired by the amazing young people from this borough and the poems they wrote and the poems they read out to us moments ago. Inspired by them, can I ask you to join me in challenging the modern informational technological planting of 'finite' ideas, truths, thoughts into us humans. I invite you

to write a poem. To sit pen in hand and to
write a few words that arise from the
'infinity' of your minds, a few words that
describe the 'finite', that you can turn around
on the page until you have written something
entirely new: may you render the 'finite'
'infinite' once again.