

**Tetsaveh - “Beaten for the Light” (*Katit la-ma’or*)**  
**Beth-El Congregation, Berkeley, California**  
**11 February 2011**  
**Professor Marc Saperstein**

It is a special joy for me to be with you here this evening. I confess that I am a somewhat typical inhabitant of the northeast corridor: I grew up on Long Island, lived for a total of 17 years in Cambridge Mass as well as a year in Cambridge England and two years in Jerusalem, but at the time I relocated to Washington University in St Louis, I had never lived west of the Hudson River. I believe that this World Union conference has provided the first time for me to be in San Francisco since a family trip in 1960, and I have never been in Berkeley before, which is why I will now invite other delegates to the World Union for Progressive Judaism Conference who are here tonight for the first time to say with me, . . . . *Shehechyanu* . . . .

I also feel privileged to be part of this event honouring Rabbi Ferenc Raj, whom I first met when we lived in neighbouring communities in the Boston area, and have renewed our acquaintance with regard to World Union matters, especially our training at LBC of a wonderful young man named Peter Radvanski from Budapest. You will here more of your Emeritus Rabbi’s praises from Rabbi Kahn, so I will move on directly to our *d’var Torah*.

When I was a child, growing up in a New York suburb, it was a family ritual to sit together for lunch on Sundays at 12:30, while listening on the radio to a programme called “The Eternal Light”. This was a series of specially commissioned, and beautifully written, half-hour dramatizations of biographies and Jewish stories, sponsored by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The programme always began with the first verse of our *parashah*, the basis of the “eternal light” tradition (in the older translation), read in a deeply resonant voice: “Command the children of Israel to bring unto thee pure olive oil, beaten for the light, to cause the lamps to burn continually: *le-ha’alot ner tamid*.”

A teacher of mine at the New York School of Hebrew Union College, Eugene Borowitz, once said to us, “There is no such thing as an ‘eternal light’; there is an eternal God, and an eternal people that strives to keep the light burning.

But tonight I want to focus on a different phrase in the verse: *katit la-ma’or*, “beaten for the light.” That phrase remained with me, but only as words. Some years later, after finishing my BA, while travelling in Morocco back in 1966, I saw near the edge of a grove of olive trees, a group of men, with large paddles, smashing what looked like large bags made of a porous cloth on the ground. I realized that this illustrated the reality behind the biblical phrase “beaten for the light”: these men were using an ancient technique, beating the olives in order to extract the oil that would either serve as a staple of their diet or be burnt in primitive lamps as a source of light.

The final step in my processing of this phrase occurred when I began my study of Midrash in rabbinical school, and came across a passage in *Shemot Rabbah* on our verse. The Midrash begins with a verse from Jeremiah: “*The Lord has named you a leafy olive tree, fair with goodly fruit (Jer 11:16).*” And then it goes on to unpack the metaphor of the Jewish people as an olive tree. “Olives are placed in a grinding mill, where they are ground; their pulp is then tied up in a hempen bale, upon which heavy stones are placed. Only after all of that do olives yield their oil. So too, Israel. The nations of the earth knock them down, drive them from place to place, imprison them, put chains around their necks, and post soldiers all around them. Only then do Israel resolve on repentance, and the Holy One responds to them” (*Shemot Rabbah* 36,1).

Needless to say, this is a rather pessimistic view of Jewish historical experience among the nations. It is unbalanced, hyperbolic, mythic, what Salo W. Baron called “the lachrymose conception of Jewish history” as an unending vale of tears. But it raises an interesting question. Do Jews tend to abandon their faith, their traditions, their Jewish loyalties in good times, and return to their spiritual roots only when they are persecuted? Do Jews produce their most important cultural creations under conditions of oppression? Can we fulfil our role as *or goyyim*, a light to the nations only as a suffering servant, beaten for that light?

This is a view that has been formulated many times since perhaps first articulated by the philosopher Spinoza (who may have taken it from a sermon by his rabbi Saul Levi Morteira): that the only reason Jews have survived is that the other nations have never stopped trying to destroy us, that hatred and oppression against us are the most powerful forces in forging our collective identity and galvanizing our will to live; that if the ADL were to be fully successful and antisemitism were truly to disappear, the Jews would soon disappear as well, assimilating and merging into the surrounding majority populations. In short, the view that conditions of openness and freedom, such as prevail here in the United States and in most of the countries represented by the World Union, may ultimately be more dangerous to Jewish survival than conditions of discrimination and intermittent persecution, such as prevailed in the Hungary in which Rabbi Raj grew up and was educated.

Is it true that Jews, like the olives, give forth their light only when they are beaten, in the periods of greatest pressure and crisis?

The historical reality is more complex. There is indeed an element of plausibility in that worldview expressed in the Midrash. Jews indeed often felt impelled to write poignant lamentations, powerful chronicles, beautiful liturgical poems, inspiring sermons in times of persecution such as the Destruction of the two Temples, the First Crusade, the Expulsion from Spain, the Russian pogroms. Many of us will remember that the inhabitants of the State of Israel and of the Diaspora transcended their differences and rose to a magnificent sense of unity during the days immediately leading up to the outbreak of the Six-Day War and the first days of the Yom Kippur War, when

the very survival of the country seemed to be at stake. In times of relative tranquillity and prosperity, that sense of purpose and unity often seems to dissipate and disappear.

Nevertheless, the Babylonian Talmud, the poetry of Samuel ha-Nagid ibn Nagrela and Judah Halevi, the philosophical works of Saadia Gaon and Maimonides, the massive historical volumes of Graetz and SW Baron, the novels and plays of Israeli and Anglo- and American-Jewish writers, were written during periods of relative peacefulness and security, in environments where Jews were not being enchained or oppressed by their Gentile neighbours. The flourishing of Jewish educational institutions in Israel, the United States and England, in numbers that exceed those of East European Jewry in its prime, testifies to the capacity of Jews to thrive culturally as well as materially, not in spite of the peoples around them, but in interaction and dialogue with them.

Leo Baeck College was founded by refugee rabbis from Nazi German, who arrived in England in the 1930s, having left when Judaism could no longer flourish, and committing themselves to establish a new rabbinical seminary in conditions of freedom. We at in the LBC rabbinical program a young woman from Odessa and a young man from Budapest. They symbolize to me the first fruits of a Jewish religious culture significantly healthier today under conditions of free religious expression than it was during the period of oppression in the USSR (1917-1990), and in eastern Europe (1945-1990).

Unlike the olive, we Jews need not be beaten and crushed to produce light-giving oil. We can keep the lamp of Jewish knowledge, creativity, and devotion burning continually in good times as well as in bad. But, as Eugene Borowitz reminds us, no light is inherently eternal, and no Jewish community is guaranteed to survive. Some of the greatest and most creative Jewish communities in our history—in Babylonia/Iraq and Persia/Iran, in Egypt, in Poland, are today faint shadows of what they once were, with very little light emanating from them. To keep that lamp burning continually and strongly requires effort, and commitment. That is the task to which we are binding ourselves through the World Union for Progressive Judaism and every one of its constituent congregations.