

## Parashat Shemot

This week, as ever, has been a turbulent time in world politics - not least in the Middle East. If you have been following the news you will be aware that there have been street protests in the Islamic Republic of Iran. When I heard this news and saw the pictures of the spontaneous protests on TV I felt compelled to remark to Rebekah and Naomi, as to how brave these people were - especially as they must surely be aware of what happened to those who engaged in similar protests back in 2009. Scores of protesters were killed by the security forces and hundreds more were arrested, brutalised and tortured. Indeed, as Amnesty International reports, at least 1000 protesters detained in the recent protests now face torture and ill-treatment in the notorious jails of the Islamic Republic. Moreover, so Amnesty says, many of the detained protesters could even face the death penalty. Even so, the protests continue. The remarkable courage of these Iranian people in pursuit of freedom is certainly humbling to those of us who live here in the comfort of the West and who likely take our freedoms for granted. And yet a student of British history will know that it wasn't that long ago that brave souls similarly protested here, because the freedoms that we enjoy today have not long been granted. Universal suffrage, for instance, is less than one hundred years old and back in the nineteenth century very few people had the right to vote. Working conditions were appalling and lifespans among the poor downtrodden masses were extremely short. The revolution in France made the establishment extremely jumpy and movements for social change were dealt with harshly. At St Peter's Field in Manchester on 16th August 1819, for instance, between 60000 - 80000 people gathered to call for Parliamentary reform. What followed has been called the Peterloo Massacre. Shortly after the meeting had begun cavalry charged the crowd with sabres drawn in order to disperse it, and in the ensuing chaos fifteen people were killed and hundreds wounded. These horrific scenes were quickly dubbed the "Peterloo Massacre" in an ironic comparison to the Battle of Waterloo which had taken place on the continent just four years earlier. Imagine that! Not so long ago people in this country put their lives on the line to protest injustice and the British authorities though little of massacring their own citizens. These are the kind of injustices and horrors that we are used to hearing today from the Middle East, from Syria, Iran and the like, but they happened here. Indeed, universal suffrage was only delivered in the early part of the twentieth century. Contrary the common perception universal male suffrage did not precede that of female by many years at all. It was only with The Representation of the People Act that all men aged 21 years and older became able to vote. This same Act gave women aged 30 and over the right to vote. A subsequent Act ten years later reduced the age of female suffrage to 21 alongside that of men. Indeed, it was only in 1969 that the voting age was lowered to 18 for both sexes. Democracy, it appears, in this country is a relatively new thing and would not have happened had courageous people not stood up to demand it and to oppose injustice.

When it comes to bravery in the face of injustice, and being willing to stand up for what is right regardless of the personal cost, there are few scenarios that are more salient, especially for us as Jews, than that of Nazi Germany. You've no doubt heard the saying, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil was that good men should do nothing." That was certainly

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the case during the Third Reich. Did every German become an anti-Semite overnight when the Nazis came to power? Not at all! Many Germans simply didn't care enough about the fate of the Jews living among them that they were prepared to put their own well-being on the line on their behalf. And it was precisely this lack of protest that facilitated the progress of the Holocaust. Christabel Bielenberg, the English wife of a German lawyer living in Germany, described the changes that she observed had taken place in Germany in the early years of Hitler's regime. After describing her husbands' growing sense of unease at the growth of anti-Semitism she wrote: "I did not share Peter's unease until a similar incident happened on one of my visits to Germany when we were sitting together in a country inn and three young Jews were drinking their wine and talking together quietly at the table next to ours. The Stormtroopers, who ganged in through the door, stood leaning against the bar staring about them with the truculent blariness of the very drunk. 'This place stinks,' said one. 'And I know why,' said another. Shades of my Irish father, I knew from the way Peter put down his glass that we were in for trouble. Six drunken Stormtroopers, three not very athletic looking Jews - one a girl - Peter and myself; my state of mind would not have earned me the Victoria Cross. I even found myself placing a restraining hand on Peter's arm, as I glanced about the restaurant, certainly expecting allies. To my surprise there were obviously none. The other citizens present were either gulping down their wine, hurriedly paying their bills or already halfway to the door. 'Silly bastards,' Peter remarked in his best English, using an expression which had become quite a favourite of his. One of the Jews gave him a half smile and called for his bill, which was brought forward at the double. They left the restaurant and Peter had to content himself with guarding their passage to the door, to the accompaniment of roars of beery laughter from the bar. It was just another incident, and it was not the picture of the drunken buffoons in brown shirts which stuck in my mind, for they were a sight we had got used to; it was rather the hurried scrambling to depart, the jostle of gutburgerliche backsides, the sudden void. It was not the agitation but the acquiescence that shocked me, and made me aware quite suddenly that I was a stranger in the place, born and bred in a country where communal activities and also communal protest belonged as much to a way of life as cricket or Christmas pudding. It was then that I too had the uncomfortable suspicion that something very nasty indeed might have come to stay."

And yet there *were* Germans, a small number admittedly compared to the masses who joined in or who looked the other way, that did raise up a voice of protest. Here's a photo of the kind that we are used to seeing from Nazi Germany and which illustrates my point. Every arm is raised in adulation of Adolf Hitler. And yet, if we look more closely, we see that one man stands out. He is standing, not with arm raised, but with arms folded in silent protest. Who was this man and what happened to him? As the website "All that is interesting" comments with regard to this photo, "The photo above has floated around the internet for a few years now, popular for one of its subjects' subtle yet profound acts of nonconformity. There is no telling how many men in that crowd were acting out of fear, fully aware that failing to salute the Fuhrer was akin to signing his own death certificate. Knowing that it was, in fact, Hitler standing before the crowd makes the disobedience all the more admirable, but what may

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seem like an act of justified transgression was at its core a gesture of love. August Landmesser, the man with his arms crossed, was married to a Jewish woman. The story of August Landmesser's anti-gesture begins, ironically enough, with the Nazi Party. In 1930, Germany's economy was in shambles, and the unstable nature of the Reichstag eventually led to its demise and ultimately the rise of the opportunistic leadership of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. In 1934, Landmesser met Irma Eckler, a Jewish woman, and the two fell deeply in love. Their engagement a year later got him expelled from the party, and their marriage application was denied under the newly enacted Nuremberg Laws. They had a baby girl, Ingrid, in October of the same year, and two years later in 1937, the family made a failed attempt to flee to Denmark, where they were apprehended at the border. August was arrested and charged for "dishonoring the race," and briefly imprisoned. In court, the two claimed to be unaware of Eckler's Jewish status, as she had been baptized in a Protestant church after her mother remarried. In May 1938, August was acquitted for lack of evidence, but with a severe warning that punishment would follow if August Landmesser dared repeat the offense. Officials made "good" on their word, as only a month later August would be arrested again and sentenced to hard labor for thirty months in a concentration camp. He would never see his beloved wife again. Meanwhile, a law was quietly passed that required the arrest of Jewish wives in the case of a man "dishonoring the race," and Irma was snatched up by the Gestapo and sent to various prisons and concentration camps, where she would eventually give birth to Irene, Landmesser and Eckler's second child. Both children were initially sent to an orphanage, though Ingrid, spared a worse fate for her status as "half cast," was sent to live with her Aryan grandparents. Irene, however, would eventually be plucked from the orphanage and sent to the camps, were a family acquaintance not to have grabbed her and whisked her away to Austria for safekeeping. Upon Irene's return to Germany, she would be hidden again—this time in a hospital ward where her Jewish identification card would be "lost," allowing her to live under the noses of her oppressors until their defeat. Their mother's tale is much more tragic. As her daughters were being bounced from orphanages to foster homes to hiding places, Irma ultimately met her maker in 1942 in the gas chambers at Bernburg. August would be released in 1941 and began work as a foreman. Two years later, as the German army became increasingly mired by its desperate circumstances, Landmesser would be drafted into a penal infantry along with thousands of other men. He would go missing in Croatia where it is presumed he died, six months before Germany would officially surrender. The now-famous photograph was probably taken on June 13th 1936, when August Landmesser was working at the Blohm + Voss shipyard and still had a family to return to at the day's end. During the unveiling of the new Horst Vessel, workers were stunned to see the Fuhrer himself in front of the ship. Landmesser likely found himself incapable of saluting the very man who publicly dehumanized his wife and daughter, and scores of others just like them, only to go home and embrace them several hours later. Landmesser might have been casually aware of propaganda photographers in the shipyard, but in that moment, his only thought was of his family. August and Irma were officially declared dead in 1949. In 1951, the Senate of Hamburg recognized the marriage of August

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Landmesser and Irma Eckler. Their daughters split their parent's names, Ingrid taking their father's and Irene keeping their mother's."

Such a tragic story! Indeed, we should honour them by taking care to remember their names - August Landmesser and Irma Eckler. You know, that photo of August, arms defiantly folded in a sea of Nazi salutes, the Fuhrer before him, says it all. While others avidly bought into the Nazi ideology and others did everything they could, or should I say did just stood by, in order to save their own necks, August stood firm. He defied evil and raised a dignified, righteous protest. As such he is an inspiration to us today. As also are many in our Biblical tradition. Take the midwives in this week's parashah for instance. As our portion opens we find that Egypt, like Nazi Germany, has turned on its Jewish population under the demagogic leadership of the evil Pharaoh. As we read, "Now there arose a new king over Egypt. He knew nothing about Yosef but said to his people, "Look, the descendants of Isra'el have become a people too numerous and powerful for us. Come, let's use wisdom in dealing with them. Otherwise, they'll continue to multiply; and in the event of war they might ally themselves with our enemies, fight against us and leave the land altogether." So they put slavemasters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built for Pharaoh the storage cities of Pitom and Ra'amses. But the more the Egyptians oppressed them, the more they multiplied and expanded, until the Egyptians came to dread the people of Isra'el and worked them relentlessly, making their lives bitter with hard labor — digging clay, making bricks, all kinds of field work; and in all this toil they were shown no mercy." These words, "they were shown no mercy" are terrifying. Indeed, not content with merely oppressing our people, the Pharaoh planned to annihilate us altogether. While the industrialised slaughter of Nazi Germany would not be possible until our modern age, Pharaoh's plan was to breed us out of existence by exterminating Jewish baby boys. Thus, "the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was called Shifrah and the other Pu'ah. "When you attend the Hebrew women and see them giving birth," he said, "if it's a boy, kill him; but if it's a girl, let her live." At this point I should note that most English translations do not adequately convey the fact that in the Hebrew text these women are "midwives to the Hebrews". In other words these midwives were not Jews, but they were Egyptians whom Pharaoh hired to do the dirty business of killing Jewish baby boys. After all, he could hardly expect Jewish women to kill Jewish babies could he. And yet his diabolical plan failed. As we are told, "the midwives were God-fearing women, so they didn't do as the king of Egypt ordered but let the boys live. The king of Egypt summoned the midwives and demanded of them, "Why have you done this and let the boys live?" The midwives answered Pharaoh, "It's because the Hebrew women aren't like the Egyptian women — they go into labor and give birth before the midwife arrives." Therefore God prospered the midwives, and the people continued to multiply and grow very powerful. Indeed, because the midwives feared God, he made them founders of families." According to the Sages these Egyptian midwives even converted to Judaism! Yes, they converted at the most unlikely of times - even in the midst of all that anti-Semitism and knowing that to convert would put their own lives at danger. Not that they hadn't already done so though by refusing to obey the Pharaoh's command. Make no mistake about it, their stand against

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injustice and against the oppression of our people, was every bit as brave and self-sacrificial as that of August Landmesser, for Pharaoh, like Hitler, wasn't a man who took protest lightly. As such, like August Landmesser, these midwives speak to us today and likewise challenge us in our faith. For many in the West faith can be an intellectual or emotional indulgence. Coming to Shul or going to Church is an opportunity to sing some happy songs and meet with friends. Nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong with seeking comfort in faith either. And yet if that's all that your faith is then there's something missing at its core because the constant refrain of the Torah and the Prophets is that we demand justice and act rightly. Many contemporary believers associate righteousness and holiness with ecstatic states that are entered into via worship or prayer. But this is not the case. Righteousness is simply about doing what is right. And holiness is what happens when we do so - we become set apart - just like August Landmesser stood apart. Look at the photo again. There you have the prophetic vision of righteousness and holiness in a nutshell. For all our modern advances we still live in a world that is full of injustice, persecution and oppression. Pharaohs still abound. That's why we in the West perhaps need to reconnect with the real meaning of righteousness and holiness and of the prophetic tradition from which they are derived. For far too many of us in the West faith has become an indulgence. Too many float around with their head in the clouds, with a faith that is no earthly good. But, as we have heard, the point of the Torah and the prophets is that your faith must be of earthly good otherwise it merely useless contemplations. As Yaakov said, "The religious observance that God the Father considers pure and faultless is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress." Moreover, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no actions to prove it? Is such "faith" able to save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food, and someone says to him, "Shalom! Keep warm and eat hearty!" without giving him what he needs, what good does it do? Thus, faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions, is dead." Is your faith too heavenly minded to be of earthly good? Has it become self-indulgent? Does it change people's lives, bringing the poor out of their poverty, befriending the friendless, defending the weak and marginalised, demanding freedom for the oppressed? As Rav Hillel said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?"