CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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THE FALKLANDS CRISIS

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SOUTHGATE AND DISTRICT REFORM SYNAGOGUE, ENFIELD, LONDON

LIKE the Spanish–American War at the end of the previous century, the Falkland Islands War was of short duration: seventy-four days, from the Argentine invasion beginning on 31 March 1982 until the surrender of the Argentine garrison in Stanley on 13 June. The number of casualties was relatively small: 255 British and 655 Argentine military personnel were killed. From a military perspective, the outcome could not have been very much in doubt. Yet the conflict aroused strong feelings in both countries, especially following dramatic attacks, leading to the destruction first of the Argentine cruiser *General Belgrano* and then, two days later, of the British destroyer *Sheffield*. Colin Eimer, born in 1945 and ordained at London's Leo Baeck College in 1971, was serving in his fifth year as rabbi of a middle-sized Reform congregation in a northern suburb of London. Like many of his colleagues, Eimer felt the need to address issues arising from the war in one of his sabbath sermons.[1]

Several themes emerge from the text, all of which we have encountered in previous sermons. The first is the challenge for the rabbi to find something appropriate to say about the war from the pulpit. Here the sticking point is not so much the anguish and confusion we have noted in sermons inspired by the two world wars, but rather the plenitude of commentary by political and military experts that the modern media have made accessible to the listeners. Should the worship service in the synagogue perhaps be a source of respite from the barrage of news, information, and opinion to which congregants are inevitably exposed in periods of crisis? Apparently, many Jews have come to expect their religious leaders to articulate a response to important events. What can the Jewish preacher add that will not merely recapitulate what others have said, and that will be an authentic 'Jewish' message?

A second theme, which appears in the very first sermon of this anthology and became especially pronounced during the First World War, is the problem of prayer in wartime. What does it mean to invoke God when armies are clashing, knowing that religious leaders of the enemy are also praying for God's help, believing that their cause is right and deserving of divine support? May one legitimately pray for the defeat of the enemy, knowing that this will necessarily entail bloodshed and grief? This problem is introduced by Eimer in the recapitulation of an earlier sermon recounting an incident in which he was asked to offer a prayer at a public occasion with only a few seconds to negotiate the tensions between his own inclinations and the expectations of the members of a borough council.

The central theme of this discourse, however, is the condemnation of the jingoistic sentiments stoked by tabloid journalism. The preacher identifies a 'brutalising process' that tends to dehumanize the enemy and expose every presentation of a viewpoint that diverges from the government position to vituperative attack—as revealed by the firestorm of protest in the media and the House of Commons that followed the statement by a high BBC official that the grief felt by Argentine widows of sailors killed in action was no less painful and tragic than the grief felt by British widows. The preacher takes his stand in defence of this statement, insisting that despite the abhorrent policies of the Argentine government, the enemy soldiers and their loved ones are as fully human as one's own.

This is what the preacher presumably emphasized as the authentically Jewish message in time of war. As we shall see in the following text (Sermon 33), a similar point was made eleven days later, though without explicit reference to contemporary counter-examples, by the chief rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits, in a lecture on 'The Morality of Warfare' delivered at the Central Synagogue of London: 'First—and this is certainly uniquely characteristic of Judaism—Jewish law insists that we should never gloat over the discomfiture or defeat of our enemies.'[2] This was a point on which the Orthodox chief rabbi and the young Reform rabbi were in full agreement. During the following four months, with the Israeli incursion into Lebanon culminating in massacres at Sabra and Shatila, the humanity of the enemy would become an issue arousing considerable anguish.[3]

[1] I am grateful to Rabbi Eimer for making his own manuscript text available to me, together with a few of his own annotations that I have included below.

[2] Jakobovits, 'The Morality of Warfare', 4; for the continuation of the passage, see Sermon 33 below, p. 521.

[3] This can be seen in the 'circular letter' sent out by Chief Rabbi Jakobovits between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur 1982, containing selections from his Rosh Hashanah sermon, later published in *L'Eylah*, 2/5 (Spring 5743/1983), pp. 1–6.

As for style, the sermon illustrates a mode of discourse antithetical to the elevated rhetoric that characterized most of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sermons. Whether because of the more intimate environment of a smaller congregation or because of changes in taste, we find ideas expressed plainly, without the ornamentation of unusual vocabulary or special literary effects. The formulations may have been polished in the delivery to some extent, but the manuscript gives the impression of serving as a script not for oratory but for conversation; for a religious leader talking directly to his people, not performing in front of them. Nor do we find the highly structured debater's presentation that characterized Gittelsohn's sermons on Vietnam. One senses that the preacher is thinking out loud, and permitting others to listen. Of course, that too may be a rhetorical ploy; but it seems quite genuine.

SERMON

DURING the past weeks, when I have met friends of mine they have often asked me the same question, 'What are you saying in your sermons about the Falklands crisis?' Simon Jenkins of *The Economist* in an article in *The Times* on Monday warned of the danger of soldiers playing at journalists and journalists playing at soldiers. This happens, he says, when the media interview retired admirals who give a political commentary on the crisis, whilst the newspapers, or at least the yellower tabloids, become militaristic. 'Latest Score: Britain 6, Argentina 0', went a headline in the *News of the World*. 'IT'S WAR', went one in the *Sun*, with apparent glee.* This is the danger for journalists, says Jenkins, that they jump on a jingoistic, militaristic bandwagon, and—as is evident in the *News of the World* example—reduce the whole thing to a game.[4]

There is a corresponding danger for religious leaders. Just as professionalism suffers when journalists play at soldiers, so does my professionalism suffer when rabbis become political commentators. So any sermon has to address itself to the crisis in a very particular way. It is impossible to escape the crisis.

* Both 'yellow' tabloid newspapers.

4 Simon Jenkins, 'When Soldiers Play Journalist and Journalists Play at Soldiers', *The Times*, 10 May 1982, p. 8; Jenkins was political editor of *The Economist*. For the *News of the World* headline, see R. Harris, *GOTCHA!*, 48 (the 'six' were 'South Georgia, two airstrips, three warplanes'). Jenkins incorporated some of the material from this article, including the *Sun* headline, into the book he co-authored on the war: see Hastings and Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands*, 135.

It is talked about everywhere and all sorts of opinions are being thrown at us. You do not come to the synagogue, I assume, to hear more purely political commentary on the situation. We all come worried and concerned by the crisis. But we also come in a sense to get away from it and in a sense with the hope that somehow, through being here, we might gain some deeper insight into what is going on, what is being said.

Two weeks ago I devoted a bat mitzvah sermon to the crisis, addressing myself to one aspect of it: the way in which each side in every conflict imagines it has God on its side. I related how, as the Chaplain to the Mayor of Enfield,* I say a prayer before each Council meeting. At the last meeting, Clive Goldwater asked me to say something about the Falklands—'Everybody's expecting it,' he said. I was in a quandary. 'What should I say?' Should I ask God, who is, of course, on our side, to pour destruction and ruin on the Argentines? I was only asked literally 30 seconds before going into the meeting so it was all very impromptu and I don't like such prayers. In the end I said something like, 'Our thoughts are with the Task Force. Guard them and protect them so that they all return safely to these shores.' Even that sort of prayer seemed to be right on the edge for me—too close to 'with God on our side'; protect *our* boys but no mention of the Argentines who are also dying.

So if I don't address myself to the crisis too often it is because I do not believe the pulpit should be used for political commentary, but it is, of course, a fine dividing line and not always clear. Political comment may produce interesting sermons, but it won't, I think, produce Jewish statements which speak out of Jewish teaching and Jewish tradition. There is, after all, a difference, a big difference between a statement by a Jew and a Jewish statement.

This week has seen a great deal of controversy over some statements made on Monday's *Panorama*,†[5] which I did not see. The director of the programme said, 'A widow in Portsmouth is no different from a widow in Buenos Aires'.[6]

* The mayor of a borough in England—not an elected, political post—usually invites the minister of his/her place of worship to become 'chaplain'. This means, as in this instance, opening Council meetings with a prayer. At that time Clive Goldwater was mayor and, as his rabbi, I became his chaplain.

† A major weekly BBC news programme, usually doing in-depth coverage of one major political/social issue.

5 For a full discussion of this programme and the firestorm of reaction to it, see R. Harris, *GOTCHA!*, 76–91.

6 According to Harris, this statement was made not by the director of *Panorama* but by the managing director of BBC radio, Richard Francis, at the International Press Institute of Madrid; picked up by the British media, it fuelled the attack on the BBC and was savaged by the *Sun*

This created a furore. Demands that he should resign because he is a traitor, or that he should either sack those responsible for the *Panorama* programme or resign himself, and so on.[7]

The war has become a 'matter of principle'. People say, 'You can't let aggression go unchecked, unpunished in the world. If the Argentines succeed, Belize won't be safe, nor will Gibraltar or any other isolated British possession.'[8] Maybe, but the word 'principle' can often hide a multitude of other things, which may in fact have little to do with real 'principles'. Some people say, 'Galtieri is a fascist dictator, Argentina ignores human rights altogether. He needs to be stopped. You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.'[9] For Jews there is the added complication that Argentina has given sanctuary to ex-Nazis and is a highly antisemitic regime.[10]

There is a brutalising process at work. Calls to suppress unpopular views in the media are just one manifestation of this process. We forget all too easily and quickly that the sailors on the *Belgrano* died just as horribly as those on the *Sheffield*.*[11] A widow in Buenos Aires does grieve just as much as a widow in

* The headline in the *Sun* when the *Belgrano* was sunk was 'GOTCHA!'—appalling enough, and even more so in the weeks that followed as it emerged that the *Belgrano* was sailing *away* from the Falklands and was outside the British-declared 'Exclusion Zone'.

(*GOTCHA!*, 83). Francis's statement was cited by Greg Dyke, former director-general of the BBC, in a speech given on 24 Apr. 2003 to the Goldsmiths College Journalism Symposium on the role of the media in the war in Iraq (<www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/speeches/stories/dyke_journalism.shtml>, checked 31 July 2006).

[7] This apparently alludes to a meeting of the Tory Media Committee at the House of Commons on 12 May 1982, in which MP Winston Churchill, who strongly attacked the statement by Richard Francis, said that George Howard, chairman of the BBC, 'should have the courage to sack those responsible for *Panorama* or offer his own resignation' (*The Times*, 13 May 1982, p. 1, col. 4; cf. R. Harris, *GOTCHA!*, 84–5.)

[8] This argument combines the 'domino' metaphor familiar from American discourse on South East Asia with an implicit evocation of the (belatedly) defiant stand against Nazi Germany. Cf. Noakes, *War and the British*, 109–10.

[9] General Leopoldo Galtieri, President of Argentina from Dec. 1981. For his human rights abuses, see *Argentina, the Military Juntas and Human Rights*.

[10] The most famous Nazi sheltered by Argentina was, of course, Adolf Eichmann. (Josef Mengele also lived in Argentina for some seven years before moving to other South American countries.) The repressive antisemitism of the contemporary Argentinian regimes had recently been vividly depicted in Timmerman's *Prisoner without a Name*. This legacy complicated the position of British Jews advocating a less militaristic position.

[11] The Argentine cruiser, *General Belgrano*, with its crew of more than 1,100 was torpedoed outside the total exclusion zone on 2 May; it sank quickly, with a loss of 368 dead. For a full account, see Gavshon and Rice, *The Sinking of the Belgrano*; and cf. John Rayner, preaching on the previous Sabbath: 'Was it really necessary to send the Task Force when we did, to sink the *General Belgrano*, to impose the 12-mile limit?' (Rayner, 'Whose Islands?', 4). The British destroyer *Sheffield*, hit by an Exocet missile on 4 May, was abandoned with a loss of 21 killed; it sank on 10 May.

Portsmouth. When we insist too glibly on a 'matter of principle' we have taken a step on the road towards ignoring the human beings who are out there in the South Atlantic on *both* sides of the Exclusion Zone. We have then started to look on them as ciphers, symbols, but not real people. They represent values we don't like and therefore we diminish their nature as human beings.

That is the top of a very dangerous and slippery slope. It is the sort of path that once you have taken one step on it, subsequent ones appear much easier than they did before taking that initial step. For in reducing the human-being-ness of others, we are also inevitably doing the same thing to ourselves. We become more callous, more brutal. I can sense these feelings in myself and don't like them. It is so easy to slip across the border line of our humanity. On one side of the line, being a human being means aspiring to the highest that we humans are capable of. On the other side we say, 'Well, we're only human after all,' as if to say, 'Don't expect too much from us.'

One of the aims of religion in general and prayer in particular is to keep this distinction sharply in focus. It involves a refining of the emotions, elevating ourselves above our baser reactions and feelings—in the case of the Falklands above jingoism, and a couldn't-care-less feeling for the Argentines.

It seems to me that this is one of the dangers we need to guard against through these troubled times.