

# Erev Shemot 5778

## Storms and Rain

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What a stormy week it has been. I hope it brought no damage to you or your home. It did blow down the shul sign so we are anonymous for the moment. Such a lot of rain...my garage was flooded...and walking down the garden, to check on any other damage I noted that all over the soil that I had neatly dug over, and in between the first signs of the bulbs peeking through...there was a mass covering of tiny weed seedlings. After all the frost and snow and rain... next summer's weeds already challenging me.

I came across a quote from the Talmud (Eruvin 56a) "In Tevet, Shevat and Adar, the sun travels through the wilderness so as not to dry up the seeds." Tonight is the 19<sup>th</sup> Tevet and global warming or not the sun certainly didn't shine on my garden but the rain sure nurtured the weeds. The Talmudic text seems to imply that it is part of the divine plan to help humans cultivate the earth...to let the plants begin to grow....and if you remember your Genesis, due to Adam's sin God decreed that weeds as well as other more useful plants would grow. So nothing new under the sun even if the sun is holidaying at some other spot on the earth at this time of year.

Sunday night Sharon and I caught sight of the rising moon... and boy, it was a supermoon. I've never seen it so large and mysterious. A friend has given me for the third year running a book she swears by "Gardening and Planting by the Moon". It proposes that on different phases of the moon one should either plant or harvest specific types of plant. It claims the moon rules the waves of the sea...why shouldn't gravity affect the growing of plants, for instance, pulling up the stems and down the tap roots. I can't make up my mind about it...it's a bit like homeopathic medicine I suppose. I wonder if the author of the snippet from the Talmud already knew the truth contained in this book....after all sometimes ancient folklore, based on observation of nature has often proved sound.

What a stormy start to the New Year. Who knows where the demonstrations in Persia will lead. Seeing the names of the cities involved I noted a riot in Isfahan...a place or rather a name that has for some time intrigued me. Do you recall it mentioned in a poem by Charles Reznikoff in our High Holyday prayerbook : Machzor Ruach Chadashah? "Let us remember those who were farmers... who were pillaged and murdered in the cities of Germany, in Spain and Russia, from York to Isfahan..." (page 315 if you want to look it up).

Looking up the history I find that the first written account of Jews in Isfahan is in 472 CE, but that they had probably been there centuries earlier. By the way that first written account tells us that in that year half the Jewish population were put to death on trumped up charges. But two hundred years later, the Jewish community had grown so much that early Arab geographers called it *al-Yahud-diyya* "the city of the Jews" and it flourished for centuries. Maimonides regarded the city as the centre of Hebrew grammatical study and the famous traveller Benjamin of Tudela visited in 1166 and estimated about 15,000 Jews and for centuries the Jews prospered there...but gradually the community declined with frequent persecutions. However in 1948 there were still 10 – 12,000 Jews living there, mostly poor so very soon most made Aliyah. There was a brief revival under the Shah but then further emigration with the Iranian Revolution. Today I believe there are about 100 Jews in town, mostly businessmen, with the main synagogue on Palestine Street (of course) holding regular

weekday and Shabbat services. The Jews, so long as they pledge allegiance to Iran and never mention Israel, appear to some extent safe...but what is happening now and in the days ahead? And how will the events in Isfahan and Tehran affect the whole of the Middle East: hopefully for the good but who knows, another throw of the political dice to remind us the current world seems more unpredictable than ever.

I will certainly focus my interest on Isfahan, because I like the sound of its name and its in the poem in our Machzor.

Happy New Year... as if we expected the year only to be happy, what a first week.

The week before I had heard part of a programme on Radio 4 about Bob Marley's song "Redemption Song" and how it has given hope to a number of people round the world in difficult political circumstances. It reminded me that we have a theme on Redemption in our Prayerbook...and it just happens to be the theme for this week's Torah portion. It starts with a telling passage by Rabbi John Rayner....and then some thoughts by one of my teachers Rabbi Ignaz Maybaum....and it contains a verse from Isaiah "Pour down, I heavens, from above and let the sky rain righteousness..." which seems to hint at my opening thoughts. In a moment we will read the theme...but first remind ourselves that the rain that falls can sometimes be seen as a curse causing damage and harm...whereas in reality it is a blessing, for without it there is no life. Maybe it says to us...indeed there is evil and cause for anxiety in the world, but so many things turn out for the good. May it be true of this week's weather and this week's news, so that 2018 be indeed a year where the good news overcomes the bad.

Now lets read Redemption on p210.

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