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קהלה קדושה שמע ישראל

As we gather to welcome the New Year of 5783, we recognise that this past month has been dominated by the passing of Queen Elizabeth II at the age of 96, after reigning over the United Kingdom and of course the Commonwealth for seventy years, and for many of us, all our lives, and some of my observations here are taken from a blog by Ephraim Zuroff from the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, printed by the Times of Israel last week.

In all my years as a British citizen, I believed that the Queen was a titular head and the Government was elected to run the country. So I was fascinated and somewhat surprised to learn that the ruling monarch is actually able to intervene and over-rule the Government - or technically the Lords.

In 1987 a list of 11 Latvians and 6 Lithuanians living in the UK who had been hiding involvement in Holocaust war crimes was presented to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that the government investigate the allegations. It was meticulously compiled and accompanied by a request that if necessary the UK create a legal mechanism to deal with the problem.

But the British government was very reluctant to do anything. The Times editorial on March 3, 1987, reminded its readers that "Britain is a Christian country...[whose] laws enshrine principles of justice tempered with mercy not vengeance," and concluded that "it is wise and humane to let matters rest."

However the passage of time does not erase sin, so an All-Party War Crimes Group was created in the Parliament which helped to galvanize political pressure on the government to take action.

Their efforts resulted in the establishment of an independent inquiry to assess the evidence against the suspects, which in turn endorsed a change in British law to enable criminal prosecution of Nazi criminals living in Great Britain. The bill passed in the House of Commons by a huge margin of 348 to 123, but was roundly defeated in the House of Lords. It was returned to the House of Commons a second time, but again it was rejected by the House of Lords. The government refused to give up and submitted it a third time to the House of Commons, where it was passed by a large margin of 254 to 88. At that point, for the first time in 70 years, the Queen used her power to sign a bill into law over the opposition of the House of Lords. That step created a legal framework to prosecute Nazi criminals who entered Great Britain illegally and sent a very important moral and judicial message that the United Kingdom. In principle, it will not be a haven for those who committed the crimes of the Third Reich.

Of course, we know that many here and in particular in or sympathetic to the Indigenous community were less convinced of the Queen's passion for justice, as powerfully explained in an article by Stan Grant. It reminds us, should we have forgotten, that this country of Australia is indeed founded upon deep and terrible injustices done to the first peoples in the name of King and country, and that we have far to go to give voice and reconciliation and reparation. Today starts the ten days of repentance and I would suggest that this should get us to urge the country to commence a path of repentance, for we know that we must first repair the damage we have caused and genuinely seek to atone and repent and prevent repetitions, before true teshuvah can occur. It is only at this point, when, as it were, the Spirit of the Universe hears our true repentance and change, that healing can take place and we can reset the relationships afresh.

We might wonder what this all has to do with Rosh Hashanah and the start of the Jewish New Year - but it is not only Jews who need to review and repent and change our ways. But we have to do so as much as anyone else, and perhaps by gathering for this most powerful period of the year, we can demonstrate a better and more searching and demanding model than others in society might generally follow. The passage of time does not wipe away the guilt, nor the repair and rehabilitation that is required. After 40 years in the desert, the Israelites had not forgotten the oppressions of Egypt or the cowardly attack of Amalek.

This week saw the 40th anniversary of an atrocity much closer to Israel, during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon to clear out the PLO who were attacking Israel's north in 1982. Somewhere between 460 and several thousand civilians were killed by the Lebanese in two camps, Sabra and Shatila. The following year, the Israeli [Kahan Commission](#), which had been established by Israel to investigate the incident, found that Israeli military personnel, aware that a massacre was in progress, had failed to take serious steps to stop it. The commission deemed Israel indirectly responsible, and that [Ariel Sharon](#), then Defense Minister, bore personal responsibility "for ignoring the danger of bloodshed and revenge", forcing him to resign.

Today Lebanon remains in turmoil, controlled by Syria, and its economy is on the verge of collapse. Whilst Syria remains, it is hard to imagine what Israel could do for this country which was once, in the time of Solomon, such a close friend of Israel that King Hiram send his best woodcutters with his cedars of Lebanon to build the Temple. Yet, when the time is right and it is possible, Israel owes Lebanon, the so-called Paris of the East, and, to be balanced, Lebanon also owes Israel as well for all the trouble that has issued across its border. Let us pray that this year will be the year for that reconciliation, and for significant steps to justice for the first peoples of Australia, and for the millions of hungry, thirsty, and oppressed human beings. May it be the year when the world responds seriously to climate change - and to the demands for freedom and justice for all. But praying alone is not enough. Prayer should give us the reminder, the courage and the encouragement - prayer is what God requires - so that we can use our words, or intellect, or tools, our bodies, our lives to bring about change for the better, tiny and incremental as it may be.

Who knew that the Queen had intervened, used her few wise words, to quietly make Britain a better, fairer place?

As the new year of 5783 starts, let us step up, not back! None of us have done enough in the past year. Strengthen us and inspire us to do more in the year to come. Amen.