

‘NORMATIVE JUDAISM’ IN THE CRISIS OF WAR: SERMONS BY ABRAHAM COHEN AND ISRAEL MATTUCK

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This study explores the conception of ‘normative Judaism’ in early 20th-century Britain through an analysis of unpublished sermons delivered during the First World War by an Orthodox and a Liberal preacher near the beginning of what would be illustrious careers. Common themes are exemplified in powerfully impressive passages from these sermons: the shock at the outbreak of a European-wide conflict and its challenge to widespread assumptions about civilization and progress; a strong sense that the apparent causes could not justify such bloodshed in tension with the desire to find some idealistic rationale for the war; ambivalence about siding with Czarist Russia against Germany and Austria, each with a far better record regarding their Jewish populations; the crucial importance for British Jews to demonstrate loyalty to their country; theological anguish and the question of why God permits the horrors to continue; the need to articulate an appropriate role for prayer (especially at national Intercession Services) despite the awareness that Jews and Christians in enemy nations were also praying for victory in the sincere belief that theirs was the cause of justice; a rejection of naïve optimism about the goals to be achieved as a result of the conflict. On each of these points, the position taken by the two preachers was almost interchangeable, suggesting that the concept of an over-arching Anglo-Judaism during this period is not without basis. Further comparison with contemporary war-time French and German Jewish preaching – in which the patriotic dimension and negative discourse about the enemy appears to be far more pronounced than in the British examples – will be illuminating.

In this essay, I propose to explore one small aspect of the concept of ‘normativity’ in Judaism by reviewing the unpublished sermons of two preachers from very different positions on the spectrum of Anglo-Jewry delivered during World War I.

First is the Orthodox Rev Abraham Cohen (1887–1957) of Birmingham. Educated at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, he continued Jewish studies in Manchester and eventually earned a Ph.D. from the University of London.¹ In 1913 he came to the Birmingham Hebrew Congregation of Singer’s Hill, where he would serve for some 36 years, becoming highly esteemed in the community and widely known beyond it for his publications on classical Jewish texts. His Sieff Lectures on Preaching at Jews’ College were published as a wonderful handbook of guidance in preparing and delivering a sermon.²

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¹ Following the custom of British Jewry, Cohen did not use the title Rabbi; at first it was ‘Rev’, then ‘Rev Dr’.

² Rev A. Cohen, *Jewish Homiletics* (London: M. L. Cailingold, 1937); the actual texts of his sermons reveal how he implemented these guidelines over three and a half decades. In addition to such popular scholarly works as *Everyman’s Talmud* (London: JM Dent, 1932) and *The Soncino Chumash* (Hindhead: Soncino, 1947), Cohen’s wide reading in what he calls ‘the by-paths of English literature’ is revealed in an illuminating anthology of English travel literature describing actual Jewish communities throughout the world: *An Anglo-Jewish Scrapbook, 1600–1940: The Jew Through English Eyes* (London: M. L. Cailingold, 1943). He also served as president of the Board of Deputies from 1949–1955, the only religious leader to have held this position: Raphael Langham, *250 Years of Convention and Contention* (London: Vallentine Mithecll, 2010), 180.

Israel Mattuck (1883–1954) was born in Lithuania and educated in America at Harvard (where he studied Semitics with Professor George Foot Moore) and the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati. When Claude G. Montefiore consulted leaders of American Reform Judaism for advice on finding an appropriate rabbi for the Jewish Religious Union, Mattuck was recommended. He first preached for the Union in June 1911 and was swiftly invited to become Minister by the Council. Mattuck was inducted to his position by Montefiore in January 1912, and soon became a major figure in the Jewish Religious Union, attracting large numbers of people to the London synagogue.³

Thus both men came to their positions in a significant Jewish community shortly before the war began, Cohen in 1913, Mattuck in 1912; they both remained actively involved through the Second World War. Both of these men were known as powerful, eloquent preachers, and the texts of their sermons confirm that reputation. The unpublished texts of these sermons⁴ are a rich source documenting the perceptions and responses by Jewish religious leaders to events universally recognized as being of staggering historical importance. They also provide a test case for measuring the extent of diversity within Anglo-Jewry during this critical period. Because the material is inaccessible in print, I will illustrate with extensive quotation from the manuscripts.

Cohen preached about the war during the first two Shabbat services following England's formal entrance as a combatant, August 8 and 15. As Mattuck apparently did not preach in the month of August, one natural comparison would be with a series of Shabbat sermons from August 1914 by the German Liberal Rabbi, Julius Jelski⁵ – but that would be a different paper. (In general, what is absent from these sermons by Cohen is the patriotic fervour so powerful in sermons by contemporary French, German and Austrian rabbis.)⁶ What were the dominant themes in Cohen's sermons from the very first weeks?

First, the shock that a war of apparently unprecedented dimensions could have broken out in 20th-century Europe. Almost 100 years had passed since the entire continent had been convulsed in this way (the Franco-Prussian War presented a similar shock, but was limited to two major powers). During that century, many had come to believe that the progress of civilisation toward greater enlightenment, toward the peaceful resolution of disputes, was irreversible. The new war presented a shattering challenge to these assumptions. On 8 August 1914, Shabbat *Nahamu*, which Cohen says brings no comfort this year, he asserts that the outbreak of war was especially troubling for Jews:

³ On Mattuck, see Lawrence Rigal and Rosita Rosenberg, *Liberal Judaism: The First Hundred Years* (London: Liberal Judaism, 2004), 45–55 passim on the early years, and Edward Kessler, *A Reader in Early Liberal Judaism* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2004), 16–18.

⁴ The hand-written texts of Cohen's sermons are in the possession of his grandson, David A. Cohen Esq. of London, who graciously made a selection relevant to the Great War available to me. They are numbered, and are identified in the first full reference by number, title, and date of delivery. The typescripts of Mattuck's sermons are in the archival collection of the Leo Baeck College Library, and are identified in the first full reference by title and date of delivery. London Metropolitan Archives also claims papers of Mattuck including sermons under their listing for Liberal Jewish Synagogue:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/records.aspx?cat=074-lma3529&cid=2-2-14#2-2-14> (26/8/2010).

⁵ Julius Jelski, *Aus grosser Zeit: Predigten Gehalten im Gotteshause der Jüdischen Reform-Gemeinde in Berlin* (Berlin: L. Lamm, 1915), especially the first four sermons, delivered in August 1914. Markus Lange has written an MA dissertation on this collection under my supervision, submitted to the KCL-LBC MA Programme in Jewish Studies, 2009.

⁶ For a preliminary study of this comparative dimension, see Janet Darley, 'When Europe Went to War: Jewish Sermons at the Beginning of World War One,' MA dissertation (King's College London, 2009).

As members of a nation who pray in every service for Universal Peace, the terrible clash of arms which now shatters the harmony of so large and important a section of humanity must cause us the deepest anguish. As the Kingdom of Priests... this military fever which has swept over Europe means for us a serious set-back for the ideals towards which we desire mankind to strive.⁷

A month and a half later, preaching on Rosh Hashanah, Israel Mattuck struck a similar chord. The disastrous toll in human life, 'the hearts and homes crushed and shattered by its titanic blows,' justify condemning the war as a 'great evil'. But the deeper significance makes it even worse:

The many slow achievements of human civilization not alone in physical institutions but in moral ideals are consumed by [the war] as paper in the fire. Ideals of social justice, universal peace and the improvement of man have in their realization been further removed from us. The results of centuries of human effort in civilization are threatened with complete destruction. The ruin of towns and sacred houses is but symbolic of the deeper spiritual ruin which this war threatens.⁸

Two weeks later, preaching on Sukkot, he returned to this theme: 'We feel keenly the burden of evil under which humanity is tottering. The fruits of many ages of civilization are in part ruined and in part threatened with ruin.'⁹ And half a year later, preaching on 'The Meaning of Progress,' Mattuck recalled these emotions at the beginning of the war:

When the war broke out and often since, many of us asked, and heard others ask the question, 'Where is now that progress of which we boasted?'... In the presence of a great cataclysm which threatens almost to engulf our civilization, and with which are associated signs of what might almost be called a return to savagery, the idea of progress seems to be emptied of all content and the belief in it seems as a dream with which we have been deluding ourselves these many years.¹⁰

Any belief in the inevitability of progress now appeared naïvely misguided. The conclusion drawn by Cohen on August 8 is powerfully sobering: 'We realise that the civilisation of which we were wont to be so proud is a hollow sham, it is superficial and below the surface primitive savagery still survives'.¹¹

A second, related theme is that of disillusion, not just at the reality of war but also at its causes. Later on, there would be claims that the war was being fought for great ideals and principles, but at this early stage, before the German invasion of Belgium, these ideals were not obvious. In his first sermon following England's entry into the war, Cohen adamantly insists that no great principle was at stake in the present conflict:

⁷ Abraham Cohen, 78, 'The European Crisis', 8 August 1914, 1. Compare the similar sentiments in a sermon delivered by Morris Joseph of the Reform West London Synagogue on 15 August 1914: 'It is a terrifying paradox, a cruel blow to our most cherished ideals. It makes us doubt the value, the reality of our civilization, the stability of righteousness, the fixity of purpose of God himself', cited in Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War, 1800–2001* (Oxford: Littman Library 2008), 299–300.

⁸ Israel Mattuck, 'The Comprehension of the Reality in Life', Rosh Hashanah, 21 September 1914, 5. The 'ruin of town and sacred houses' undoubtedly alludes to the devastation of Louvain with its medieval treasures at the end of August, and the German bombardment of the Rheins Cathedral just two days before the sermon was delivered.

⁹ Mattuck, 'The Abiding Goodness of God', 5 October 1914, 1. Mattuck again characterized the war as 'evil' in his 28 November 1914 sermon, 'What Can Religion Do?', 3: '[W]ar is a denial of the teachings of religion. It is an evil resulting from human causes'.

¹⁰ Mattuck, 'The Meaning of Progress', 5 February 1915, 2.

¹¹ Cohen, 8 August 1914, 2.

To the really religious soul – whether Jewish or Christian – the events of the past fortnight can only bring utter disgust... Conduct is considered perfectly fair in international matters which, if performed by an individual in his private affairs, would gain for him the reputation of being a liar, a rogue, a thief, and a blackguard... [The European war is] caused by the greed and selfish ambition of one, or two, nations. The desire for territorial expansion is at the root of the present upheaval. What should we think of a man who was prepared to sacrifice the lives of thousands in order to enrich himself? Yet, the parallel is very close.¹²

Toward the end of his sermon, he makes this point even more explicitly: the war has been caused by the ambitions of Russia and Germany to become the master-power of Europe, ‘Therefore this war is a corrupt war, there being no high principle at stake’.¹³

In his Rosh Hashanah 1914 sermon, Mattuck presented a similar analysis of the causes of the current conflict: ‘Because power has taken the place of peace, and the pursuit of wealth supplanted the pursuit of righteousness and militarism destroyed morality, we are visited with this curse’.¹⁴ The following year, preaching on Rosh Hashanah 1915, Mattuck again looked back at the rampant confusion in a period before what he called the true issues and ideals had been clarified:

When last year we met on these days for our worship we were still dazed by the stunning force of the almost sudden blow. We saw the causes reaching far back into history and rising out of the moral and spiritual faults in human character. The causes then, perhaps, absorbed our interest to the almost complete exclusion of thoughts about the issues. Vaguely and generally we apprehended the latter. But the year has made them clear.¹⁵

Yet he still feels the need to repudiate the cynical view that the war is being fought for narrow national interests:

In the minds of many, a country’s dominion may stand for nothing more than extended opportunities for trade, protection in various quarters of the globe, and satisfactory opportunities for them born with it to progress in industry or other material interest...

If that were all nationality stood for, then this war were a horrible and inexpiable crime, not only for the nations that brought it on, but for all the nations that partake in it. If the struggle were for trade interests, colonial possessions or mere physical power, then every drop of blood spilt in it were an eternal cry of condemnation, and every sacrifice made but as the sacrifices to unheeding idols.¹⁶

It is almost as if he accepts the more the idealistic approach to the war because the consequences of denying it would be so devastating.

Up to this point, almost everything I have cited could have been said by a liberal Christian priest or pastor as well. But British Jewish leaders felt an especially deep ambivalence in the alliance of their country with Czarist Russia against Germany and Austria, with their records regarding Jews so superior to that of the Russian Empire. Cohen begins his August 8 sermon noting,

Possibly at this very moment, Jew may be fighting Jew. Is it not a tragedy that our brethren by the thousands are jeopardising their lives in defence of a country like Russia which, in time of peace,

¹² Ibid., 2–3.

¹³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴ Mattuck, 21 September 1914, 6.

¹⁵ Mattuck, ‘The War and Spiritual Progress’, Rosh Hashanah, 9 September 1915, 2.

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

denies them the elementary rights of citizenship, crushes them under a burden of restrictive laws, and even permits their wholesale massacre!¹⁷

As I have shown in a different context,¹⁸ the ambivalence about siding with Russia was alleviated by reports of the wave of patriotism that swept over Russian Jewry, noted by Mattuck on 23 January 1915, when he said that the Russian Jews ‘who themselves had suffered these horrors [of persecution] were prepared to forget them and to sacrifice their all for the country which, in spite of its past treatment, they still love’.¹⁹ The massive number of Jews who volunteered for military service in the Czarist army, and widely-reported citations for bravery in combat, led to the expectations that their demonstration of loyalty would eventually discredit antisemites and result in the removal of discriminatory legislation. But the first theme – that Jews were fighting other Jews in unprecedented numbers – remained a cause of deep distress, especially for the Zionists.²⁰

Nevertheless, in his second sermon following Britain’s entry into the war, Cohen asserted strongly that Jews had a special stake and responsibility to demonstrate their loyalty to their country. British Jews ‘cannot remain indifferent to the gigantic contest in which England was forced to take a part’, he insists. All over Europe, Jews are being put to the test: to refute or confirm the accusations of the antisemites.

This war will prove whether our traducers are correct who say we are self-seekers, parasites, who absorb all we can get but give nothing or little in return. Jewry has now a supreme opportunity of refuting that slander once for all, by showing that we do understand what gratitude is to a State which grants us liberty, security, and full political rights and we are prepared to make sacrifices in its time of need.²¹

In addition to enlisting in the army, Cohen urges Jews to avoid panic-driven hoarding, create opportunities for employment, give generously to charity funds, and volunteer for personal service to such organizations as the Ladies Guilds making garments for the destitute.²²

In early 1915, Mattuck, preaching on ‘War and the Jews’, spoke of the hopes for the improvement of the Jewish condition in Czarist Russia because of the sacrificial devotion of Jews to the Russian national cause and the suffering of Jewish communities that bore the brunt of the battle during the first months. In the same sermon he emphasized the need to cultivate a sense of national unity, fostering a concern on the part of western Jews,

¹⁷ Cohen, 8 August, 1914, 1.

¹⁸ See Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War, 1800–2001*, 303–4, and at greater length in ‘Western Jewish Perceptions of Russian Jews at the Beginning of the First World War’, *European Judaism* 43:1 (2010), 116–27.

¹⁹ Mattuck, ‘War and the Jews’, 23 January 1915, 3.

²⁰ For a strong early expression of this view, note Rabbi Dr Samuel Daiches, speaking on 3 August 1914 at the convention of the Order of Ancient Maccabæans in Liverpool: ‘On this very day nearly half a million of our brethren in the various armies of Europe are ready to fight against and kill one another, and are ready to lay down their lives. For what? Not for Palestine. Not for Jerusalem. Not for national independence. Not for Jewish supremacy, and not for the good of humanity; but in order to help the European nations to call down a curse on their own heads and to make Europe into a heap of ashes. This illustrates the depth of a tragedy in the life of the Jewish nation.’ *Jewish Chronicle*, 7 August 1914, 13. And cf. also George (Gedaliah) Silverstone, in Washington DC on 25 October, 1914: ‘For we are not fighting for our country, as is the Russian army, which is fighting for Russia, and the British army for their country, England, and the German army for Germany, and similarly the French and the Turks. Not us. We Jews are compelled to fight for all of these, not for ourselves’ (Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War*, 306–7).

²¹ Cohen, 79, ‘The European Crisis – II’, 15 August 1914, 2–3.

²² Ibid. 4–6.

expressed through a ‘trans-national organization’, to act on behalf of the Jews suffering in the East.²³

No preacher could avoid speaking about the theological crisis presented by the war. Cohen addressed this directly in a sermon entitled ‘God and the War’, delivered on 24 October 1914. The question has forced itself upon many: ‘What is God doing while His earth is being drenched with human blood? Why does He permit these horrors to go on? Why does He not put an end to them?’ Not unexpectedly, Cohen responds that God’s creation of human beings as free agents precludes divine intervention to prevent humans from carrying out their nefarious plans. Perhaps more surprising, he asserts that it would be a disaster if God intervened to stop the war at present while the root causes of the war remained unabated. And thirdly he points to some of the positive results of the war: acts of heroism and self-sacrifice, splendid examples of charity and renunciation.

Despite the challenges raised by the contemporary reality, Cohen affirms belief in a traditional providential theology: ‘I am perfectly sure that God not only is aware of all that is happening but is shaping the destiny of the human race’. This is followed by a passage of powerful optimism about the regeneration of the human spirit resulting from the war’s termination, using traditional images of messianic birth pangs and the dark night before the dawn. The present war

will bring about a complete regeneration of the human race, the birth of a new humanity purged of the vices which corrupted the old. But as with the birth of the individual, the birth of the new humanity must necessarily be a time of pain and strain... Darkness does indeed enshroud us; but [future generations] will refer to it as the night which was the herald of a beautiful dawn, a dawn which brought to mankind the blessings of peace and brotherhood.²⁴

Though in retrospect this appears almost painfully naïve and ironic, and Cohen would indeed become somewhat disillusioned about the capacity for regeneration as the war dragged on, the faith of the preacher may have been perceived at the time as a source of comfort and reassurance.

Mattuck articulated similar challenges to faith. On 24 April 1915, he refers to the theological test presented by the devastation of war, noting that he has already discussed this theme in the past.²⁵ The agonizing problem is articulated in a single sentence from his sermon on Yom Kippur morning, 1915: ‘Why has God permitted so great an evil to come into the world?’²⁶ His responses to this challenge are in some ways similar to that of Cohen. First, he shifts responsibility away from God and onto human beings, bestowed with freedom of choice: War is ‘an evil resulting from human causes... The responsibility for the evil naturally lies upon them with whom it originated.’²⁷ Second, he emphasizes the positive by-products of the devastation, which may in some sense serve to counter-balance the negatives, though without altering the evil of war itself. These include an enhanced sense of national

²³ Mattuck, ‘War and the Jews’, 23 January 1915, 3, 7.

²⁴ Cohen, 98, ‘God and the War’, 24 October 1914, 1–2, 5–7. Compare the use of this night and dawn imagery, using an aggadah about Adam’s experience of the first night, by Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz on 1 January 1916: Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War*, 320.

²⁵ Mattuck, ‘Some Religious Ideals and the War’, 24 April 1915, 3–4.

²⁶ Mattuck, Yom Kippur Morning, 17 September 1915, 14. Cf. Cohen, ‘When we look at the map and see the vast stretches of territory in the possession of the enemy, we grow despondent and ask despairingly, “What is God doing?”’ 183, Intercession Sermon, 1 January, 1916, 7.

²⁷ Mattuck, ‘What Can Religion Do?’ 28 November 1914, 3.

social unity and interdependence, transcending the self-interest of special social units,²⁸ and ‘the heroism and self-sacrifice of the men in the fighting-line, the fortitude and humble resignation of those who at home bear their part of the burden’,²⁹ and finally the challenge and opportunity of sharing in the creation of a new world which will follow the termination of the present bloodshed. Though these qualities cannot compensate for the evil, they may, to some extent, mitigate it.³⁰

What then is the proper role of prayer in the context of the catastrophic bloodbath in the heart of Europe? Is it acceptable to invoke God’s favour when armies are arrayed with the purpose of devastating each other? What should we be asking for? How significant is the recognition that in the churches and synagogues of the enemy nations, many people are beseeching God in the sincere belief that right is on their side? These questions were raised by the first Day of National Prayer and Intercession during the war, proclaimed by the Crown for 2 January 1915.

In his Birmingham sermon on that day, Abraham Cohen begins with a strong assertion of the traditional Jewish doctrine of God’s sovereign mastery over historical events, which he presents as a doctrine intrinsic to the concept of a day of National Prayer. He concedes the challenges to this doctrine presented by the war, ‘when blood is being spilt like water, when the fairness of fields is marred by trenches filled with men whose savage passions have been aroused, when murder is organised on a gigantic scale.’ Furthermore, he reminds his listeners that ‘the places of worship in enemy lands are also full of men and women praying to the same God for victory to their side. We believe conscientiously that we have entered into this awful struggle with clean hands and in a righteous cause; but so do our enemies.’³¹

What then is the proper spirit for this day? What follows strikes me as an extraordinary passage for a day when patriotic spirit and denigration of the enemy was being aroused in many pulpits. Our role on this day, the preacher says, is

to commit our cause to God, even as our hostile neighbours do, and let Him decide the right. We should pray to Him not for victory but for the vindication of the truth. If justice be with us, then let our enemies be punished for the incalculable harm they have inflicted upon the human race. If justice be with them, then let God exact the penalty from us. Should both sides have contributed to the causes of this deadly struggle, we must pray to Him to let us see where we have been wrong, in what we have been guilty.³²

We once saw war as glamorous, manly, and heroic, the preacher says. ‘But now we see it in all its hideous reality, in its grim nakedness, and the sight is too ghastly to contemplate. Modern warfare is a contest of machines for killing and maiming the largest number. Those machines,

²⁸ Mattuck, ‘The War and Social Conscience’, 24 October 1914, 6.

²⁹ Mattuck, 28 November 1914, 3.

³⁰ Mattuck, ‘Faith and the National Crisis’, 2 January 1915, 3–4, 8.

³¹ Cohen, 109, Intercession Sermon, 2 January 1915, 3. He would return to this reminder two years later: ‘But let us not overlook the obvious fact that, in enemy lands, similar prayers are being offered to the same God for success to their cause, which they sincerely believe to be as righteous as we believe ours to be. How can God answer a petition for victory from opposing sides?’ (261, ‘Terrible Things in Righteousness’, 30 December 1916, 5). Consciously or not, Cohen’s insistence that both sides to the conflict were sincerely praying for God’s help with conviction in the righteousness of their cause echoes Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural address during the American Civil War: the North and the South both ‘read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. . . . The prayers of both could not be answered’. *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859–1865* (New York: Library of America, 1989), 686–687.

³² Cohen, 2 January 1915, 3–4.

when once silenced, must be silenced for ever and consigned to a museum as a memorial of a barbaric age which can never recur.’ That is the only prayer fitting for this occasion.³³

On the same day, the message of Liberal Rabbi Israel Mattuck on this point was quite similar to that of his Orthodox Colleague in Birmingham. No country may assume that all right is on its side. We are firm in the belief that we are fighting for the triumph of justice and right, he insists. Nevertheless,

It is true that human judgments may be wrong, and what we conceive to be right may not be so. And therefore we must be humble even while determined and confident, and avoid self-righteousness even while struggling for that which we conceive to be righteousness. It is for man to seek guidance through his faith and work by the best light he has. If then he err, God’s mercy has prepared forgiveness for him.³⁴

In his Intercession sermon a year later, Cohen reiterated his faith in divine providence. The very idea of an Intercession service is dependent upon the belief that God can, and does, interfere in the schemes of mankind – otherwise prayers addressed to Him are vain and useless. Yet he recognizes that similar beliefs could be documented on the other side:

The Germans have that faith in abundance. If the reports of speeches attributed to the Kaiser are correct, we see that his belief that God interferes in the activities of men and nations is very real indeed, so real that he claims the Deity to be an ally of Germany. That is gross profanation, and we must beware lest *we* claim Him as an ally of Great Britain. In the victory of Germany or England, as political States, I believe God to be entirely unconcerned. But I do most firmly believe that God is concerned in the defeat of wickedness and treachery and evil ambition. If righteousness were to succumb finally—I emphasize that word ‘finally’—to the onslaught of brute force, my faith in God would be shattered. But as I scan the pages of the past, I read distinctly the lesson that right has always triumphed eventually, and I believe that this lesson will receive its culminating illustration in the present time of crisis.³⁵

And so he concludes, in the spirit of his statement from the previous year, ‘On this Sabbath of Intercession all that we should do is to commit our cause to God and let Him decide the right. We should pray to Him, not so much for victory, as for the vindication of truth. And above all, we should supplicate Him to hasten the end of this dreadful deluge of blood...’³⁶

One year later, at the third intercession sermon, the challenges to faith had not become any less pressing for Cohen. With courageous candour, he reviews the progression of events and their psychological toll during two and a half years of combat:

But does God hear prayer? I put the question bluntly, because I fear that at the back of our minds we have doubts about it, doubts which have probably been strengthened by the devastating storm through which we are passing.³⁷

Here the preacher is articulating questions and doubts on behalf of his congregants, suggesting that he too may not be immune to them. He then proceeds to specifics, in a passage suggesting that he too was not immune to bewilderment:

³³ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁴ Mattuck, 2 January 1915, 5. Compare A.A. Green’s strong challenge to the very institution of the Day of National Prayer in his Intercession Sermon the following year (1 January 1916): A.A. Green, *Sermons*, ed. Henrietta Adler (London: Martin Hopkinson, 1935), 135–41.

³⁵ Cohen, Intercession Sermon, 1 January 1916, 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁷ Cohen, Intercession Service, 30 December 1916, 1.

Six months after the outbreak of war, we held an Intercession Service and called upon God to aid the right. It was followed by a year's hard fighting, the end of which found the enemy in a stronger position than before. Russia, our great hope, had been forced to retreat. Poland and Serbia were completely overrun; Bulgaria had declared against us. We held another Intercession Service, and few of us at that time doubted that before another twelve months had elapsed, our cause would have been won. But we have had to endure bitter disappointments. Our men fought like the heroes they are; they made the supreme sacrifice in appalling numbers; but the resources of the enemy proved still too strong. Victory is a long way off; even the entry of Roumania on our side has turned out a disaster... Why then hold an intercession Service? Does God heed our supplications?³⁸

Unlike Cohen, Mattuck does not defend the traditional idea of God's sovereign control over historical events, probably because he did not believe in it – this is indeed a significant theological difference between the two preachers. The sceptical position is expressed perhaps most clearly by Mattuck in a sermon delivered on 5 January 1918, the fifth annual National Day of Prayer during the war. What may we pray for on this day? he asks rhetorically? 'There are some who still look to God for relief from human burdens, responsibilities and duties, hoping that He would do things for us. The day of miraculous interference by Providence in the course of human events is past. What we want, we must ourselves strive for. For our failures we must ourselves pay; and for the failures and sins of the race, all humanity must pay.'³⁹ Here Mattuck follows the standard liberal response to the theological challenge: God is not responsible for the war, it is the failure of human beings. *We* are the ones who must take responsibility. Nevertheless, in his sermon following the Armistice, on 16 November 1918, he invokes some of the traditional rhetoric of divine providence:

With gratitude we greet the coming of victory and peace, gratitude to God Whose guiding hand lies on the events in human history, from Whom alone comes the strength men use. Even as we prayed to Him and stayed our hearts on Him when things seemed to go ill for this country and those associated with it, and the deep darkness of anxiety brooded over our spirits, so now that light has shined forth let us see in it the flashings of God's arm and in all humility praise and thank Him.⁴⁰

One of the important themes in all war-time sermons is the way the preacher speaks about the enemy. Does he resort to the kind of disparaging language that is prevalent in the general society: 'the Hun is at the gate'? Does he demonize the enemy as the embodiment of evil: the Amalek of the present time? Or does he recognize a common human bond on both sides of the battleground?

Abraham Cohen avoids the most derogatory rhetoric in speaking about those whom he characterizes as 'the enemy'. As we have already seen, Cohen recognized that genuine and heartfelt religious faith can be found in the churches and synagogues of the opposing side: 'in enemy lands, similar prayers are being offered to the same God for success to their cause, which they sincerely believe to be as righteous as we believe ours to be'.⁴¹ His purpose in such passages is to undermine a self-righteous sense of entitlement in claims to God's favour.

³⁸ Ibid., 1–2.

³⁹ Mattuck, 'Looking to God', 5 January 1918, 2.

⁴⁰ Mattuck, 'Victory and Peace', Thanksgiving Service, 16 November 1918, 1.

⁴¹ Cohen, Intercession Sermon, 30 December 1916, 5. Cf. the passage cited above from the Intercession Sermon two years previously: 'We believe conscientiously that we have entered into this awful struggle with clean hands and in a righteous cause; but so do our enemies.'

At times he gives the Germans a somewhat grudging respect. In a Hanukkah sermon from December 1914, he conceded the discipline and technical prowess of the German soldier, in order to apply the Hanukkah theme of triumph not by might but by the power of the spirit:

The German Army as a war machine has been brought to the highest pitch of perfection... As an army and from the military standpoint, there is nothing to equal it in the world. But it is an iron image with feet of clay, and is going to be smashed to pieces. It lacks one thing which will bring about its downfall – it lacks the true moral spirit. That was shown conclusively at the Battle of Mons in the month of August... The spirit of our men proved mightier than the superior numbers of the enemy.⁴²

Yet Cohen was also capable of condemning the policies and practice of German warfare, the soldiers who executed them, and the population which supported them. His Intercession Day sermon from January 1915 includes a prayer that God may soften the hearts of the adversaries towards those opposed to them. What follows, however, is a strong condemnation, if not of the German soldiers themselves, then certainly of their behaviour. The enemy, he says,

seem to have retained the old savage practice of war. They are fighting like barbarians, not like a European nation in the 20th century. They have deliberately adopted the policy of *Schrecklichkeit* – the policy of ‘terrorism’, their hope being to strike fear in the heart of their opponents. Accordingly they have heartlessly overrun Belgium, laid its towns in ruins, shockingly ill-treated the civilian population; they have dropped bombs indiscriminately, and a few weeks ago crowned their work by bombarding undefended coast towns, killing inoffensive women and children. What is most deplorable about the matter is the fact that these contraventions of international law have been applauded by the entire German people.⁴³

Mattuck goes considerably further in insisting on the humanity of the enemy. In a sermon delivered on 28 November 1914, he raises a classical problem for Jewish leaders preaching in times of war: the tendency to exult in a military victory while ignoring the human costs for those who were defeated.⁴⁴ ‘We want our country’s arms to be victorious, and the victory of one combatant must mean the defeat of another. Can we not, however, spare a tear for the fallen in the opposing host? Certainly there can be no ground for full-hearted rejoicing.’

The preacher continues by citing a celebrated passage from the rabbinic aggadah: When the waters of the Red Sea closed over the Egyptian army, the heavenly angels began to sing a song of praise for the Almighty. God immediately rebuked them, saying, *Ma’asei yadai tov'im ba-yam, ve-atem omrim shirah?* ‘My creatures are drowning in the sea, and you would sing a song of praise?!’ or as Mattuck translates it, ‘Will ye sing a song of praise when so many of my children have been destroyed?’ (The extent to which this passage appears in war-time sermons is a touchstone for the liberalism of the speaker.) What follows is a strong critique of the contemporary discourse of victory, ‘The talk about ‘crushing’ the adversary becomes but a stumbling block in the way of peace, and a menace to its continuance after it is established.

⁴² Cohen, 106, ‘The Invincible Spirit’, 13 December 1914, 4–5.

⁴³ Cohen, 2 January 1915, 6–7.

⁴⁴ For this theme in the middle of the eighteenth century, see Marc Saperstein, *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn* (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1996), 151–52.

False ideals must be crushed, unrighteousness must be trampled under foot, but nations and men must be helped to a realization of what is good, and to a horror of what is evil.⁴⁵

Mattuck's refusal to demonize the enemy, to set them outside the circle of human empathy and concern, continued through the war, as we see in his sermon delivered on a National Day of Prayer, 5 January 1918: 'Today we think altogether of the life of the nation, and of our own lives in relation to it. And may we not say we think of the life of humanity, yes, of *foes* as of friends? That the right we seek, as God has given us to see that right, is for the world?'⁴⁶ Here we see the universalistic instinct of the Liberal asserting itself despite the bleak realities of his time.

This same instinct is expressed in occasional strong responses to the less appealing emotions evident within the broader society. Speaking on 23 October 1915, Mattuck states that in addition to the admirable emotions of national solidarity and self-sacrifice, he recognizes that the war has stirred up base emotions, opposed to the spirit of true religion: 'There has, for example, been an outcry for reprisals for the dastardly murders of women and children committed by the airships. It is not likely that such reprisals can serve any useful military purpose... [They] can have no value, but the satisfaction of the desire for revenge, and great as the temptation here might be, we are yet commanded by religion to seek no vengeance'. And even if they *had* a distinct military benefit, they would still not be justifiable, the preacher insists.⁴⁷

In his National Day of Prayer sermon for 5 January 1918, Mattuck asserts that a grave danger to the national life arises from 'those who exalt the passions of war, as hatred, the lust for revenge, and from those who would translate the hope of victory into hopes for material gain. Only the other day we were all invited to take part in an organized campaign to spread hatred... The effort to conceal the true character of the clamour for passions under the cloak of patriotism can deceive no one who wishes to see.'⁴⁸

Mattuck returns to this theme in a special service held on 3 August 1918, the fourth anniversary of Britain's entry into the war. Alongside the positive elements he acknowledges both on the fields of battle and in the spiritual realm – the greater emphasis on moral and spiritual values rather than merely self-defence and national self-determination, the renewed faith in democracy, the League of Nations – there is a debit side: the intensifying spirit of hatred and vengeance. 'If it were not disgusting, it would be heartbreaking, to see how innocent people are harassed and persecuted only to satisfy the outbursts of a blind passion

⁴⁵ Mattuck, 28 November 1914, 7–8. This would appear to be a characteristically liberal stance. There was, however, a disparity among the leaders of British Liberal Judaism. My colleague Daniel Langton has called to my attention a letter written to Mattuck by Claude G Montefiore, which states, 'Again, for instance, there is a rumour tonight that a German battleship has been sunk. I rejoice. . . . Even if all have gone down, I rejoice that there is one German battleship less.' Unfortunately the letter is undated, and it could be totally independent of the sermon. On the other hand, it is certainly not impossible that Mattuck chose to make this point and cite this aggadah about 'My creatures are drowning in the sea' as an explicit response to the letter and the attitude it reflects. It is also possible that Montefiore wrote the letter in response to this sermon. Such are the fascinating ambiguities of working with this literature. See Daniel Langton, *Claude Montefiore: His Life and Thought* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2002), 9, with reference on 22.

⁴⁶ Mattuck, 'Looking to God', 5 January 1918, 1.

⁴⁷ Mattuck, 'The Challenge to Religion in War', 23 October 1915, 10–11.

⁴⁸ Mattuck, 5 January 1918, 5–6. The reference to the 'organized campaign to spread hatred', which everyone in the congregation would probably have understood, is unclear to me.

which parades as patriotism. It is unworthy at any time, but worse in a nation giving its best in a war for righteousness.⁴⁹

As the war continued beyond all expectations at its outset, neither preacher was able to remain naïvely optimistic about the fulfilment of the hope that this would be ‘the war which will end war’.⁵⁰ A generation later, preaching almost two years after the beginning of the Second World War, Cohen cited a passage from a sermon he delivered in 1917, which appears to be hauntingly prophetic:

Not the crushing of Germany and the perpetuation of the evil which brought this war into being should be the aim; for in that case, all this precious blood will have been spilt in vain. What must be crushed is the survival of barbaric methods which have brought disaster upon the world. Merely to replace one self-hypnotized War Lord by another is to prepare for another European war. Should – as we hope and pray – should victory side with us and our allies, and should the result be just a weakened Germany and another competition in armaments and another race for power – then we shall have fought in vain, and the struggle will with certainty recur.⁵¹

Nor was Mattuck unduly sanguine about the prospects that the values of national self-determination, justice, and peace would actually be achieved once the war had ended. In certain passages, Mattuck seems to have had an uncanny unease about the future, his great hope mingled with concern about possible perils at the conclusion of the war. In a sermon delivered 9 December 1916, he warned that historical precedents were not encouraging about the prospects for the war to transform a society for the good. The precedent he cites was from his own history across the Atlantic:

The greatest war in the last century, and one which has been referred to again and again in connection with the present war as a sort of parallel, the American Civil War, holds out both a promise and a warning. While it produced the actual aims for which it was fought in spite of the great odds against which Lincoln and his associates had to contend and the early discouraging defeats, it was, however, followed by a period of great confusion and what was worse, the play of some of the worst passions. It has taken America many decades to overcome the evil of the period of reconstruction which followed the civil war, and perhaps that evil is not yet altogether overcome.⁵²

Although spoken from his education as an American, that final formulation – ‘perhaps that evil is not yet altogether overcome’ – is a fine example of British understatement.

On 19 January 1918, Mattuck warned against the sentiment of conceptualizing reconstruction as an attempt ‘to produce in the nation a greater military efficiency for the next time when its military prowess may be challenged’. Continuing to strengthen military capacity in order to meet a possible future threat was to adopt the militaristic philosophy of the German state and the society against which Britain was fighting. Of course, the logical

⁴⁹ Mattuck, ‘After Four Years’, 3 August 1918, 6. This passage is extremely close in sentiment to the sermon delivered by the Orthodox Rabbi Herman Gollancz a month later on Rosh Hashanah 1918 in a sermon entitled ‘Nationalism Within Bounds’. Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War*, 370–73.

⁵⁰ Cohen identified H.G. Wells as the one who originated the phrase (in August 1914), which became quite popular, based on the assumption that the hideous destructiveness would convince all reasonable people that war is ‘unspeakably loathsome’, but by May 1916, he notes that the phrase was no longer heard so frequently, due to doubts that this argument from experience would be enough to make future war inconceivable: See Cohen, 288, ‘The Cause of War’, 19 May 1916, 1.

⁵¹ Cohen, 80, ‘The Worship of Molech’, 23 August, 1941. I have not found the original text of this sermon.

⁵² Mattuck, ‘The War and Character’, 9 December 1916, 6.

consequence of this anti-militaristic vision of post-war reconstruction was that Germany must be crushed to the point where she would be incapable of waging war again. Mattuck therefore rejected premature peace initiatives from Germany, citing the statement by Prime Minister David Lloyd George, so painfully ironic in retrospect, “There must be no “next time””.⁵³

His hopes for the future were expressed in a sermon delivered some nine months later, on 7 September 1918: ‘A new world, where peace shall not be but the moment of exhaustion after the war and of rest before the new war, but the abiding condition of man rooted in the love and pursuit of righteousness’. Yet the same sermon contains a warning that – also in retrospect – seems frighteningly prophetic: ‘An unscrupulous or deluded demagogue with plausible tongue and violent sincerity, seeming or real, could make out of the present susceptibility to new ideas and change a spirit of evil.’⁵⁴ It is unclear to me whether in this context he was thinking of Germany or of England, but it was certainly a nightmare that he must have been devastated to see fulfilled.

To be sure, I have presented a limited sample of two preachers in one war, from the same country. But it is striking to me is how similar these pulpit messages are. The major exception was in Cohen’s insistence on divine providence, despite the apparent empirical refutation posed by the war – this was a position he maintained even through World War II – and perhaps Mattuck’s heightened insistence on seeing the Germans as fellow human beings. Setting aside personal style, on all the other themes relating to the war, it would be difficult to differentiate between the two men. I believe that the same would be true in comparing the war-time sermons of, let us say, the Reform Rabbi Morris Joseph and the Orthodox Rabbi Hermann Gollancz. In my judgment, these figures justify speaking of normative Judaism in the Anglo-Jewish context from the early twentieth century. I wonder whether we could pick similar examples across the divide of Orthodox and Progressive Judaism in the UK today.

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⁵³ Mattuck, ‘Ideals in Reconstruction’, 19 January 1918, 5. The statement was made by Lloyd George in an address at a rally on 4 August 1917 commemorating the third anniversary of the war (which received extensive front-page coverage in the *New York Times*, 5 August 1917, 1–2). On Mattuck’s ideas about the necessary post-war reconstruction of British society, see his sermon ‘The Basis for Social Reconstruction after the War’, 3 February 1917, in which he argues that the state, with a truly representative government, should make decisions about education, and other critical problems, rather than leaving them to groups in accordance with special interests; it should not leave industrial relations ‘to be settled by bargains, strikes and lock-outs, regulated and impelled by the interest of one group or another’ (9).

⁵⁴ Mattuck, ‘New Life’ (Day of Memorial, Wigmore Hall), 7 September 1918, 4–5, 3.

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