

Weekend reflections

in partnership with WMFF and BCF

1 March

Counting heads



THE Torah reading last Saturday (Exodus 30/11 to 34/35) commences with the Law of the Shekel. God forbids Moses to count the Children of Israel directly. Instead, every adult male must give a half-shekel by way of a ‘ransom for his soul’ – a census is then simply a matter of counting coins. The penalty for disregarding this law would be an outbreak of plague ...

What is the rationale behind such a strange law? Why should it be so dangerous to count Israelites? Even today, there persists, within the Jewish community, a reluctance to ‘count heads’. With the benefit of hindsight, Chief Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks offers this explanation.

The total number of Jews in the world is tiny – less than a small statistical error in the Chinese census. Counting heads would only serve to underline their numerical weakness and lead to despondency and defeatism. But *count their contribution* – to western thought and civilisation, to the arts, sciences, medicine and commerce – and suddenly you have a people that has more than paid its way in the world.

In the first such event ever organised by the town, the London Borough of Harrow last Sunday paid a formal and moving tribute to my old girlfriend, who died last year aged 65. An ordinary Jewish girl from Birmingham, she matured into an ordinary Jewish house- wife, mother and grandmother – and an extraordinary councillor and, latterly, mayor of the borough. As I sat there, I couldn’t help thinking ... ‘contribution, contribution ...’.

Brian Cooper is a member of the local Jewish community. A retired electrical engineer, he is also a member of the Birmingham Council of Faiths and its former Chair.

8 March

Environment – our challenge



notice that by the framing of an issue we can either take responsibility for it or distance ourselves from it. Take war and famine: most people agree that these are man-made problems; so for example the United Nation's preamble mentions that it works to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". But when it comes to issues like climate change and desertification - equally man-made, as now proven beyond reasonable doubt by the vast majority of relevant scientists - then these are called environmental problems, not just problems caused by man. And by so calling them, we think we can leave their solution to environmentalists.

Also as people of faith we can experience environmentalists as trying to sell us a competing faith, due to the passion and commitment with which we are told about the state of the planet. However, I would suggest we see through linguistics, appreciate that the earth's future is in all our interest and work on the shared care we have, or at least should have, for Creation. For example, as a Muslim I know that without a living planet the aims of Shariah (protection of life, dignity, faith, property and offspring) cannot be sustained. I am therefore very happy to be involved with Birmingham Friends of the Earth in their Multi-faith Project, which aims to harness the teachings of the faiths to finding personal solutions.

Threatened as we all are, let's be at peace with each other and with the rest of Creation.

Rianne ten Veen has a Master of Law degree from Leiden University (Netherlands), a Master of International Politics degree from CERIS (Belgium) and Paris XI University (France) and has been working for Islamic Relief in Birmingham since 2003. She is particularly interested in the environment and its overlap with issues of peace and justice



15 March

Being at Home



ELONGING to Jainism now, but having roots in Hinduism, had not been a point of much deliberation for me. Though different, the two faiths seemed to belong to each other in so many ways. When I was young I used to enjoy the cultural festivities that Hinduism offers. But situations change and I married into another faith.

The decision about which to follow left me in a predicament. Being rooted in one and now transplanted, I felt I couldn't abandon one for the other, so I decided to keep faith in both. But wise guides warned me to decide on a single way for my spiritual journey and that stepping on two boats at the same time couldn't take me far.

It has been a slow revelation. After stepping on both boats, to use the analogy, I felt then that I could never be wholly part of any faith. But when at last I was ready to embrace one completely, I had no doubts that I was doing the right thing.

A recent visit to the Balaji Hindu temple in Tipton was like going back home, which we all look forward to. This journey away from Hinduism, culminating at the Balaji temple, has given me time to assess which path really satisfied my spiritual quest and would help me to pave that way forward.

As the American writer Ursula Le Guin says, "It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters in the end".



Archana Jain was born in India and has been part of the Jain community in Birmingham since 1990. Recently she took part in the Faith Guides course on behalf of the Jain Ashram in Handsworth.

22 March

Easter Saturday

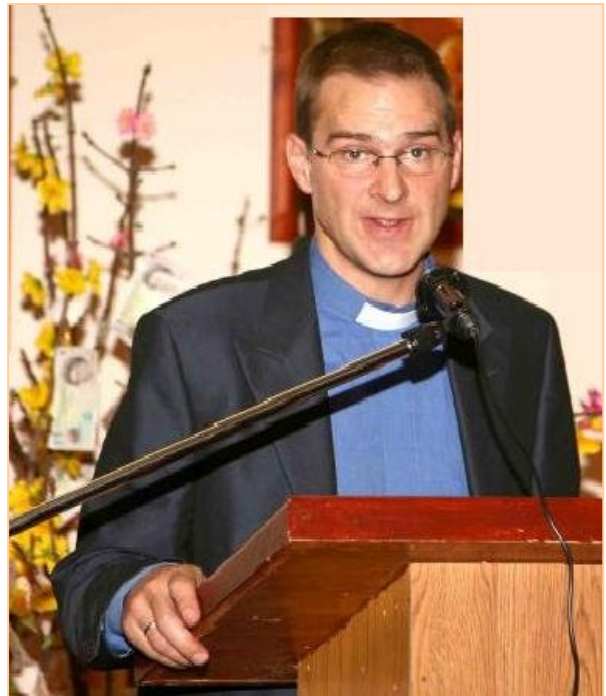


ODAY, Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, is an 'in between time'. As Christians remember and relive the story, Jesus' body is lying in the cold tomb, a large stone blocking the entrance. The dramatic events of the previous week reached their climax with Jesus' crucifixion. That is over, but Easter Sunday with its almost unbelievable joy has not yet come.

Even in their grief, Jesus' friends as observant Jews hold to the Sabbath rest. They long to visit the grave and complete the funeral rites denied the day before. But they don't move on yet. Instead, they spend the day in obedience to the *Torah*: in worship, rest and reflection. It is an important time; those who follow the story do well to heed their example and not move too quickly on to Easter.

Many of us find ourselves at one time or another in an 'in between' time. Something ends, and we are tempted to move quickly to whatever we can get to replace it. Many feel also that our society is at an 'in between' time. The old world that we were used to is increasingly giving way to something new. But what that new world will look like, no one is yet quite sure. It is an uncomfortable time. It can even be dangerous. But a wise person will not lose their nerve. As with Jesus, new life will come. The question is: will we be ready to recognise and receive it?

*The cosmopolitan **Toby Howarth** was born in Kenya, brought up in Britain and received his higher education in the U.S. After further globe trotting, he is presently vicar of St Christopher's Church in Springfield and the Bishop of Birmingham's Inter Faith Adviser.*



29 March

Feeding the Hungry



want to share a personal secret with you. I struggle to tempt myself away from good food, whether it is spicy stuff or sugary desserts. Result: worrying imbalance between my weight and my height.

While I am worried about my increasing weight as I resist the omnipresent delicious temptations, there are many, many people in our global village who face the opposite dilemma. As parents of young children, they have to choose whether to buy school books for them or to buy barely enough food to make sure that they do put on some weight. While I pull a face when the food on my plate is slightly less tasty than usual and my fridge is bursting with various food items, millions don't have any food on their plate for hours or even days.

Why? Is this huge imbalance natural? I am sure it is not. It is as much human-made as my own personal imbalance is. And I can do something about this global imbalance just as I can do something about my increasing girth. I need to give more and keep less just as I need to burn more calories and eat less. So giving to those who are hungry is actually my responsibility, not my generosity. And when I am fulfilling my responsibility, I am ensuring that others get what is rightfully theirs. That is why God urged us in His books, including the Qur'an, to feed the hungry and urge others to do so.

Shakil Ahmed attends Birmingham Central Mosque. A member of the Islamic Society of Britain and a volunteer at Birmingham Community Partnership, he is an interpreter and translator and lives in Moseley with his wife and three children. Currently he is raising funds for books, food and medicines for Palestinian children by walking 2,342 miles (the distance between Birmingham and Jerusalem).